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PRISON EXPERIENCE IN THE WORK OF SOME SOUTH AFRICAN WRITERS FROM *LESSING TO CRONIN*

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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Declaration

I declare that this dissertation is my own, unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University.

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Abstract

This dissertation brings to light a variety of texts written about incarceration in South African gaols. Imprisonment is not a natural way of life, and in order to render it tolerable, prisoners create diversionary activities that mirror those of the outside world. One such diversion is the telling of stories.

Prisoners display a great need to communicate with others not only while inside the prison, but after their release. One of the effective ways in which they do this is by constructing entertaining and informative tales, based either on memories of life outside the prison or on the raw material of their surroundings inside.

This study examines an autobiography, the prison yarn, a diary, a fictionalised reconstruction, and a volume of poetry, indicating that there is no single literary response to imprisonment. All the texts aim at purging the writers of their ordeal at the same time as exposing the conditions in South African prisons.

Introduction

This dissertation aims to expose and explore literary material written about incarceration in South African prisons. The literature falls into four categories: work written by common-law criminals, detainees who have not been charged or tried, white political prisoners and black political prisoners.[1]

Each of the five writers discussed falls into one of the four categories. Christoffel Lessing (Chapter One) and Herman Charles Bosman (Chapter Two), convicted on criminal counts, served sentences in Pretoria Central Prison. Ruth First (Chapter Three) was detained in solitary confinement for one hundred and seventeen days, without ever being charged. D M Zwelonke (Chapter Four) was sentenced to a term on Robben Island for engaging in Pan Africanist Congress activities, and Jeremy Cronin (Chapter Five) was convicted under the Terrorism Act for carrying out underground work for the African National Congress. He served most of his time in Pretoria's Maximum Security Prison.

Former prisoners are often fascinating storytellers, who design their narratives for the best possible impact. Storytelling is a normal healthy cultural process in all societies. Like any community, the prison provides a forum for the development of cultural forms. It is particularly conducive to the production of tales.

Among the many reasons for telling stories are the passing on of experiences and the intention to give valuable advice at the same time as providing entertainment. As Walter Benjamin[2] suggests, the best storytelling

> combined the lore of faraway places, such as a much travelled man brings home, with the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to natives of a place.
> (Benjamin, page 85)

In a broad sense, the prisoner is like a traveller who has returned home with tales of his experiences. He is also, while in prison, like the "resident tiller of the soil" (Ibid), offering sound advice to those around him. The particular storytelling techniques of each writer will be presented in each chapter.

The majority of texts about prison in this country are written by so-called political prisoners rather than by criminals - Lessing and Bosman are exceptions. This is partly because the level of education among common law prisoners is generally not as advanced as that of political prisoners, and partly because political prisoners have among their motives for writing the desire further to indict the political system which imprisoned them.

In addition, a large proportion of the published material is by white prisoners. The major reason for this is that white prisoners are statistically more likely than black prisoners to have received an education equipping them with more than basic literacy.[3]

Each chapter of this study contains socio-historical and biographical contextualisation, as well as textual comment. Chapter One has a somewhat different structure from the others: Lessing's writing, and his life, are presented through interviews conducted with him between October 1986 and October 1987. His perspectives on both his life and his writing are juxtaposed with archival evidence and textual references. Chapters One and Two are linked not only because both writers fall into the same category of prisoner, but because Bosman's book appears to have been written as a response to Lessing.

Bosman's book appears to be a base from which subsequent texts about imprisonment in South Africa are constructed. Many of the later texts depend in some way on the storytelling techniques used by Bosman in Cold Stone Jug. His format enables writers to explore their imprisonment from a number of angles, allowing catharsis, exposure of conditions and entertainment.

It will become evident to the reader that there is considerable variety in the five texts discussed. Each writer had his or her personal reasons for writing about imprisonment and each text reflects the experience of the particular category of prisoner. However, the texts also have certain elements in common. Despite the differences, all reveal imprisonment to have been exceedingly traumatic. Writing about the experience assists the prisoner in coming to terms with the years spent behind bars and the readjustment to regular community life.

Chapter One

The nearer I got to completing the manuscript, the greater became my haste. The speed with which I wrote and the fears that urged me on undoubtedly detracted from the quality of the book - especially towards the end. But at that stage it was far better to get an imperfect story into the hands of the public than to forfeit the finished product to the prison authorities and into the bargain bring a heavy punishment upon myself.
(Forth from the Dungeon, page 120)

Christoffel Lessing was an inmate of South Africa's common law prison system for almost twenty years. When he first entered a corrective institution[1] he was fifteen or sixteen, and had passed Standard 5. By the time he was released from his first indeterminate sentence[2] he had obtained a matric certificate and nine credits towards a Bachelor of Arts degree. When he left prison for the last time after serving a second indeterminate sentence, on 9th February 1947, he was on the brink of publishing three books.[3] Over the next ten years, he published twelve books and contributed over thirty articles and short stories to a variety of local magazines (such as Brandwag, Die Ruiter and Huisgenoot).[4] Virtually all Lessing's writing was based on the experiences he had as a prisoner.

The above quotation comes from Lessing's second autobiography, Forth from the Dungeon,[5] the first autobiography, To What Red Hell,[6] is the book described in his quotation as "an imperfect story". As a consequence of his knowledge of its imperfection, Lessing wrote the later book, in which he looked back on his imprisonment and analysed his writing, as well as his personal development, after nine uninterrupted years of freedom.

Christoffel Lessing wrote and published during the 1940s and 1950s. At that time, his books were widely read and he was a well-known figure.[7] As soon as he stopped publishing, he was largely forgotten. Despite a search in library catalogues for any material about imprisonment, no references to Lessing's books were found[8] until 1986, when I was alerted to David Goldblatt's article in Staz,[9] titled "A note: Christoffel Lessing". Goldblatt wrote:

> While looking for information in Johannesburg's Africana library on the Fort, the city's oldest prison, I chanced on the writing of Christoffel Lessing, a former inmate of that place. [...] In 1983, anxious to see Lessing's account of his stay in the Fort published in a magazine, I tried to contact him for permission to do this. He was not to be found. Then in March 1986, Staz discovered that he was in Johannesburg.
> (Staz, Page 17)

Goldblatt's article, based on an interview with Lessing, enabled me to contact Lessing and interview him both about his experiences in prison and his writings. The discussions I have had with Lessing have subsequently augmented the early ideas of this dissertation considerably and have enabled me to construct an overview of the life and writings of a man who spent twenty years in prison institutions and emerged as a prolific writer and a riveting storyteller.

One of Lessing's captivating tales is the story of how he began to upgrade his literacy level in prison.

> I think it was when I was in the Fort that I met this fellow, Barney. He taught me not only to bind books, but he taught me composition. He made me alphabets - he wrote in big letters and small letters and I copied. Then afterwards he told me what books to read. And I asked him one day, I said "Barney, do you think I'll ever be able to write a book myself?" And he said "No! I haven't ever heard you say a single original thing!"
> (Interview, 1986)

Lessing laughed when he related this story. Several years after the incident described above, Lessing met Barney again. Barney was then an inmate of Sonderwater Work Colony where Lessing was assistant superintendent.[10] By then Lessing had published about twelve books and over thirty articles and stories in magazines, including a few autobiographical pieces with his wife Carrie. Virtually all Lessing's writing was based on the twenty years he spent in prison and prison-like institutions. Lessing left prison for the last time in 1947. His writing career began some time before that, and is still continuing.[11]

Born in 1911 to a poor-white family in the Eastern Transvaal town of Lydenburg, Lessing grew up a "delinquent" and was in and out of institutions until he finally managed to escape the cycle in which he had been trapped from the age of fifteen. (He later [in the 1960s] made a great deal of money in a property development company but subsequently ended up insolvent.)

Lessing's first book, Ek Ellendige Mens[12] appeared almost simultaneously with his release from prison in 1947, and was translated as To What Red Hell shortly thereafter. From early in 1947 until his appointment to the position of assistant superintendent at Sonderwater in 1951[13] he contributed a wealth of material to Afrikaans literary magazines such as Brandwag and Huiter and was constantly being invited to address all kinds of audiences. After his appointment to Sonderwater, Lessing stopped writing, but when he left the employ of the Department of Social Welfare he published Die Tweede Myl and its English counterpart Forth from the Darkness.[14] (Lessing wrote the Afrikaans and English versions simultaneously.) Until late in the 1970s, Lessing then stopped writing for publication and was somehow forgotten. He says that he stopped writing about prison because it was no longer relevant to his personal growth. When he

had started writing, it had served as the only means by which he could come to terms with the years he had spent in captivity.

To What Red Hell (1949) and Forth from the Dungeon (1956), the English narratives of Lessing's life story, form the primary focus in this study, although my opinions about his writing have been augmented by interviews with Lessing. The two texts exhibit important differences as well as similarities. The major difference between the two is that To What Red Hell was written in a prison cell and ends just prior to Lessing's release, while Forth from the Dungeon was written nine years after his release and examines his life "from a different perspective".[15] The difference is chiefly in the style and the pace of the two books rather than in the content. While Forth from the Dungeon is lengthy and detailed, To What Red Hell almost screams to an end, because of the anguish, frustration and haste to complete the manuscript before his release. It tells, according to Lessing, an unfinished tale, which is one of the reasons for focusing on the later text.

However, one does not expect identical stories in two editions of an autobiography, merely compatibility and historical accuracy. Autobiography implicitly claims a truth-status, and if the objective truth differs from the printed word, the reader will generally be satisfied if the book has a ring of authenticity and if the text has its own integrity. The assumption in discussing autobiography is that it is true, and the modus operandi of the scholar is thus to examine the way in which the writer has crafted the tale of his or her life. Encountering the "objective truth"[16] behind a story makes the study of the craft particularly fascinating.

In Lessing's case, the autobiography appears in two versions - which immediately suggests that something was either omitted the first time or added for a particular effect the second time. Lessing's answer is that as time

passes, different events gain different significance, and are thus presented differently in later writing. His oral testimony gives weight in turn to much that was fleetingly dealt with in the texts.[17]

In the ensuing pages, Lessing's biography will be presented as it is enmeshed with his writing. Where there are discrepancies, either between his two books or between the written, oral and archival accounts, these will be discussed.

Christoffel Lessing was the fourth of six surviving children. His father was a roadganger in the Eastern Transvaal, where Lessing spent his early years.

> From my birth we were a family of wanderers. My father was a ganger on the roads, and although at night we slept in a tent or in some kind of shack by the roadside, the heavens were our roof by day and an open fire my mother's kitchen.
> (op cit, page 4)

Lessing's childhood was not merely disadvantaged by poverty but also devastated by the untimely death of his mother. She died during the 1918 'flu epidemic, leaving behind her husband and six children (one other child died with her) ranging in age from three weeks to eighteen years old. Christoffel Lessing was seven. Ever since, he has believed that his mother's death and the subsequent disruptive movements of the family set him on the path towards "failure" and delinquency, and ultimately to prison, where he served two indeterminate sentences as an habitual criminal between 1933 and 1947.[18]

Throughout his writing Lessing mentions that he was deprived of a mother's love and was hence unable to function adequately in society, until he found someone who was able to love, nurture and support him in the way he would have expected his mother to have done.[19]

After their mother's death the Lessing children were sent to live with relatives on a farm. Their cousins overworked them and withheld any form of affection.

Lessing's writing tends occasionally towards the melodramatic as in the description of this period of his childhood:

> Worse than the cold was the loneliness and hunger for love that gnawed at my soul ... when I thought of mother I would grunt: "She is gone. I shall never see her again."
> Often as I sat there behind my ant-heap I would chew zaw mielies to try and satisfy the hunger that was really in my heart. When the wind moaned over the flats, pressing down the long grass in waves, I would search and search for something to fill the incomprehensible emptiness in my heart - something firm and strong and permanent to anchor my life to. But a soul that rides the wind finds no rest.
> (Ibid, page 7)

Although taken from Forth from the Dungeon, this passage is in many ways more typical of Lessing's writing style in To What Red Hell, his earlier book. In the later book, Lessing's writing is not as melodramatic as it was at first. In Forth from the Dungeon, Lessing's style is clearer but he nonetheless tends towards the sentimental, especially when he writes about his childhood years and the growth of his relationship with Corrie. Lessing clearly chose his words and images with care so that they reflect accurately the psychological effects of the harshness of his experiences in prison. The sentimentality of his style often adds to the compelling nature of his writing rather than detracts from it. The writing style enables the reader to feel familiar with the writer and his tale.

While he was in prison, Lessing studied psychology. In his prose, he is at all times conscious of utilising what he learned from textbooks. He tries (even now) to use his vast, if dated, knowledge of the human psyche to explain, justify or simply understand the events and problems of his own life.

In general, Lessing's choice of imagery appears to have been all too conscious. Images of wind, thorn trees,

and various aspects of the Eastern Transvaal's terrain abound. These are representative not only of the physical terrain of Lessing's childhood, but of the emotional bleakness he remembers. It is significant that natural and elemental images appear in many texts written by former prisoners, but have their own importance according to who uses them. (For example, as will be explored in Chapter Five, Jeremy Cronin writes about the elements not only as a way of capturing the texture of life in South Africa but as a way of exploring and reconciling himself to his Catholicism; Bosman [Chapter Two] describes the stone yard in the prison in such a way that it is representative of his own spiritual state and that of his companions. The stone quarries on Robben Island, described in island literary material [Chapter Four], recreate the bleak physical environment of the prison as well as refer to the level of morality of the dominant group.)

Lessing's choice of imagery, although "realist" in the sense that it accurately reflects the physical setting of the Eastern Transvaal, must be assessed against the physical cruelty and spiritual emptiness of the prison cell in which he was writing. Up to the time he was writing about, everything in Lessing's life had been harsh and traumatic. He portrayed through his images that the world outside the prison was as much a wasteland as the one within it.

The realist style of some of Lessing's descriptive passages forms a stark contrast to the sentimental, melodramatic style of the introspective, spiritual passages. In contrast to the passage quoted above are those where Lessing is able to create a physical setting easily imagined by the reader. (For example, he is able to describe his cell and some of his escape routes in fine detail.)

The almost over-conscious use of harsh, desolate imagery may lead the reader to question Lessing's choice

of setting for his childhood years in the book: Lydenburg literally means "town of suffering", and from the way he writes about it one might assume that he invented the name.

Obviously he did not.20 Nonetheless, it would have been in keeping with Lessing's style had he invented the name Lydenburg. For in To What Red Hell, he invented all the place names, and there he chose to call the town "Armstad", which means "poor town". His aim was to reflect its spiritual and emotional poverty.

After the Lessing children were removed by their father from their relatives at Kranskuil, the farm, they lived with their father on the outskirts of Lydenburg. Lessing writes

> I had many thrashings, but I was happy on the whole and up to all the pranks of a normal boy. I smoked; I tried to ride Piet [his father's horse], and sometimes when I had had a good hiding I was ashamed to go to school and played truant, calling on the shopkeeper in the dorp. (Ibid, page 9)

Shame and truancy recur as inseparable feeling and action throughout Lessing's childhood memories. Whenever he ran into trouble, he felt ashamed of himself and fled to avoid public embarrassment. In later years this led to his continuous fleeing from the police, and his recurrent attempts at escape. His escapes were often successful, until such time as his physical needs led him to the police.

As time passed, Lessing's sister married and moved away from the roadmaker's camp into the town of Lydenburg. Some months later Lessing fell off his bicycle and wounded his leg severely. In order to be nearer the doctor, he had to live in Lydenburg. He was sent to live with his sister and her husband and there, in his view, he suffered enormous indignity and unfair treatment. He was unable to walk for about six weeks and was thus confined to bed. In later years he thought back on this time spent in bed and wrote

> These six weeks in bed, the morbid introspection and unfulfilled desires, the habit of daydreaming and of being waited upon as I had been during the first six years of my life had made me a stranger to reality. I had lost touch.
> I longed to be back in bed, and there was no one to show me the way to adapt myself to society. I had felt out of place before; now I was much worse.
> (To What Red Hell, page 16)

When Lessing wrote these words, he was lying on his belly in a cell in Pretoria Central Prison. His cell, too, was a place of morbid introspection; the unfulfilled desires were even more out of reach, and daydreaming was one of the few escape routes open to him.

Another escape was writing. It was through his writing that Lessing tried to bring himself in touch with the reality of the world that was continuing outside the prison. In writing his memoirs, he was attempting to analyse how and why he came to be in prison.

Soon after returning to school in Lydenburg, after his recuperation, Lessing committed his first "crime". He reacted to it in the way he continued to react each time he committed an unsuccessful criminal act: he ran away, feeling remorseful and hard done by - he blamed circumstances. Lessing describes his reactions in order to highlight the fact that, in his own opinion, he is not and never has been a genuine "criminal", but rather a victim of cruel circumstances.

Lessing was cleaning out his sister's bedroom one day when he found "a florin or a half-a-crown". He resented never having any pocket money, so he pocketed the coin. When questioned, he admitted having taken the money, whereafter he received a severe beating from his father, who was summoned from his camp on the outskirts of the town to deal with him. Lessing believed that this incident greatly affected the path he was to follow.

He wished only that his father had listened to his side of the story and explained to him why what he had done was wrong, rather than punish him so viciously

without a hearing. This incident is treated at some length because it serves as a useful analogy for the way Lessing later felt about the courts of law. Each time he appeared before a magistrate, Lessing describes how his own explanations were hardly listened to, while the magistrates sentenced him on the testimony of others. As a result, he became increasingly resentful of authority.

After his father arrived and dragged him out of his bed for a savage beating, he refused to return to school. He feared the other children in case they would laugh at him or tease him, which they duly did. The child's misery at home became so great that

> I used to hang about foraging in (...) rubbish-bins and peering into outhouses without the least idea what was the matter with me or what I was looking for. My life was one of unbearable discontent - frantic, anchorless, haunted.
> (Fourth from the Dungeon, page 13)

As a result of his behaviour he was punished frequently. As the punishments increased so did the truancy, until Lessing could bear it no more. He ran away from home to the police station, one of the few times in his life that such a place would serve as a sanctuary. His father acknowledged his unhappiness and arranged to have him sent to the local school as a boarder, rather than remain with his sister.

However, school had also become a nightmare for Lessing. He felt poor and rejected, even after his father had equipped him with "finery".[21] He felt protective towards his younger sister, and in helping her landed himself in further trouble. Finally, he was put in a dormitory with an older boy who was meant to look after him and assist him in becoming well behaved. Lessing resented having a "policeman" watch him. The boy, Kasper, decided to have a birthday party in the room one night. Kasper provided his guests with alcohol and cigarettes, and Lessing was required to keep watch for the housemaster and to act as waiter at the party. When the master

returned from church, the guests managed to escape and Lessing jumped into bed fully clothed. On discovery by the master, he pretended that Kasper was not involved in the proceedings at all, even though he knew that he would be expelled. The terror he felt at the thought of his father was far worse than the fear of expulsion from school. He writes

> I lay awake for a long time that night, thinking what father would say and do. Here was his eleven-year-old son found in possession of strong drink! He had nearly killed me for taking half-a-crown! The very thought of what he might do sent me into a fever.
> (Ibid, page 18)

Immediately, Lessing took what had by then become a characteristic action. He ran away. When he was found and returned to his sister's house, she refused to take him back. Eventually his father retrieved him from the policeman (who had helped him once before), and took the child with him to the roadside camp. Lessing writes that

> As we sped along, my thoughts went before us to the familiar surroundings of a road-maker's camp - the life in a tent, free and unfettered, away from the demands of society. I was tired of trying to learn through tears and blows the responsibilities of community life.
> (Ibid, page 19)

These are presented as the thoughts of an eleven-year-old child. Although written from the perspective of a grown man, they probably serve as accurate memories. This was perhaps the last time in Lessing's childhood that he was to be at all happy. After the incidents at school, he lived for some time with his father, who disciplined him strictly when he misbehaved and eventually abandoned him to his godparents, Oom Hein and Tant Mien Esmin, and their spoilt children. Lessing felt that his father regarded him as an animal that could be left in anyone's care. It is unlikely that he ever forgave him for this, even in later years when he and his wife took care of the ageing man.[22]

It is interesting to compare Lessing's fantasy of his father's potential reactions with the man's actual behaviour. When he took him home his father was quiet and sulky, probably distraught at his son's "delinquency", and he may have been feeling helpless and inadequate as a parent. However, Lessing's father's feelings are not as significant as those of his son. Lessing had a tendency to act according to his fantasy of potential consequences: fearing his father, he ran away. In later years, fear of the consequences of his actions led him to run from the authorities so that he always ended up facing more charges than he expected to.

His faith in his fantasy is what has led Lessing to believe that he was often a victim of other people's harsh judgements. For example, after his escape from the Daviaanspoort Work Colony in approximately 1930, he found work on a farm. One morning a police constable arrived to visit the farmer.

> After a while he and Oom Danie appeared, coming in my direction. Every now and then the constable would look towards me. I knew they were talking about me [...]. A sudden fright that the constable had come to arrest me seized me. I became panicky. I knew it would not help me to run.
> (Ibid, page 77)

When caught, he faced charges of car theft and petrol theft as well as escape from the work colony. Instead of merely being returned to the work colony, Lessing was sentenced to three years in prison.

This peculiar behaviour trait of Lessing's recurs in many of his anecdotes. The way he writes about each event leaves the reader feeling as though he or she has read an entire chapter packed with detail after reading only a few pages. One is thus tempted to question how much of the stories are fabricated, for that is how they seem. Yet the archival evidence for most of Lessing's anecdotes corroborates his tales.

In a... [illegible] it is extremely common in the stories of former prisoners to hear tales of great adventure and excitement - most of which are factually true, but have this effect because they are related with much bravado. There is undeniably a particular vein of storytelling common to ex-prisoners, as we shall see.

To return to the chronology of Lessing's biography - which is lengthy in order to emphasise the background against which he developed as a writer, as well as to highlight the reasons for his continual imprisonment - after some months his father abandoned him on the farm of Heinrich Eaman.

The years spent on the farm were most unpleasant for Lessing. He was treated very differently from the Eaman children and was afraid to ask for more to eat when he was hungry. Lessing remained on the farm with Oom Hein's family for three years. He does not say whether his father ever visited him during this time.

When Oom Hein's mother died, Lessing knew that things could only get worse for him since she had been fairly kind to him. He managed to run away on the day of her funeral, after stealing five pounds of Oom Hein's money. He was found by Old Lukas, his father's servant, and taken to his father, who showed signs of anger at Eaman and a little sympathy. He was clearly concerned about his child, but unable to express this easily. Lukas was accused of stealing a donkey, which he had done so that he could transport Lessing to his father, while no one noticed the missing five pounds. This was Lessing's second theft. He believed that he was entitled to the money as compensation for the treatment he had received. For four months, Lessing claims he was happy. But then his father was again transferred and he was sent back to his sister in Lydenburg.

From this point on, Lessing's life changed for the worse. He became somewhat of a rogue, tempted to spend way beyond his means. He was completely unaware of the

extent of his crimes until much later. He honestly believed that he was entitled to borrow from the wealthy. For a good few years after he began to suffer the consequences of *his actions*, Lessing continued to believe that he was a victim of circumstance unable to function according to society's norms because he had never been taught about the w by a parent. He still believes this, but in a different way. Now, after twenty years in jail, and as a result of intense introspection during his imprisonment and through his writing he claims to understand why he was a victim of circumstance: no-one had ever encouraged him in any way, and he was never given adequate opportunity to explain his actions.

By the time he moved back to Lydenburg, Lessing had gone as far as Standard 4 or 5 at school, which meant that he had a fairly low level of literacy, but was literate and numerate enough to find a job as an office boy with an attorney. He was fairly good at his job, but early on developed a penchant for tea and cake from the corner cafe, and for good quality, fashionable clothes. He bought on credit and borrowed from wealthier people in the town.

> All went well until the end of the month, when my debts fell due. I owed more than seven pounds and my nett income was four shillings and threepence, for I had advances of a shilling here and a shilling there for the bioscope or cigarettes.
> (*Ibid*, page 29)

Subsequently, Lessing's fortunes deteriorated in a way reminiscent of *a fictitious*, melodramatic screen scenario. The attorney died suddenly and Lessing was left jobless. He was hired by the post office as a messenger. His small wages had to be distributed among his creditors and handed over to his sister, but he chose to pay only one creditor in full. This man immediately offered him more credit. Others were kind enough to let him off his debts, and in his relief, he rode away on the post office bicycle, clad in his messenger's uniform, towards his

father's camp. His father's employees realised that he was not there on legitimate post office business, and urged him to return to the town. Lessing pretended that he was on his way to the next town with messages for the post office there.

When he returned, having been offered a lift home by a police sergeant in the next town, he was arrested and told that he would be charged with the theft of a uniform and a bicycle. Released after spending some hours in a cell, the distraught child went to seek help from the dominee, who "pointed a finger at me and said: 'Young fellow, you are going to gaol!'" (Ibid, page 32.)

Unsurprisingly, Lessing's resentment of such responses took the form of thefts and fraud.

Lessing was not charged with theft, but he was not given a chance to forget his action. He was teased mercilessly by village children, who tarred and feathered him and eventually he was sent by his father to an industrial school near George in the Cape.[23] The parson who arranged his admission to the school was a Mrs Van Voort, a welfare worker in Lydenburg.

> The following day, Monday, Mrs Van Voort and my father interviewed the magistrate at his office. I learnt later that father had signed a report stating that "Stoffel is sometimes naughty." But the immediate result was more devastating than my father could ever have dreamt; for the father who had refused to entrust his son to the care of a good-hearted Englishman[24] had now abandoned all responsibility for me and declared me a State child.
> That same evening, two constables, who were at least in plain clothes, put me on the train. I was heartsore, full of misgivings. I feared the unknown, and asked many anxious questions about the school I was going to.
> (Ibid, pages 35)

It was not long before Lessing discovered that the school was in fact an institution operating as a school housing delinquents regarded as too young and not quite criminal enough for a reformatory. He clashed with the authorities from the very first day, and was extremely

miserable and anxious when they forced him to go to the beach without his shoes.[25] He soon made up his mind not to stay: as always, escape was uppermost in his mind. With a companion, who managed to procure some clothing from the stores, he left the school and followed the nearby railway line so that they would not get lost. They were apprehended at the first station they reached, and taken back to the school. After being confined to a cell for a week, the boys were tried by a magistrate and Lessing was sentenced to two years at Houtpoort reformatory, near Heidelberg in the Transvaal.

Some months after his arrival at the reformatory, Lessing ran away from there as well, but was not punished further once caught. He describes the life in the reformatory as fairly typical of institution life as he later experienced it. The boys were all miserable and did as little work as possible. Lessing, accustomed to the hard work on Saben's farm, at first worked faster and harder than all the other boys. He writes:

> I realised months later why I had had so much more energy than the others. They had been tamed by forced labour, in which they saw no use or meaning. For them each day had to be got through in a monotonous, useless pattern; just another day in their colourless, meaningless existence. They were no longer personalities with enthusiasm, ambition and enterprise, but cogs in a machine. They were not lazy or timid, merely indifferent.
> (Ibid, page 44)

The inmates of the reformatory knew that whether they worked or not, the government would still provide them with food until they left the institution. Mealtimes and the food at the institutions came to have particular significance:

> The boys did not look as if they suffered from lack of food, so I could not understand why they were in such a hurry for their meal. I thought the food must be something worth hurrying for, but when I saw the coarse bread and the mug of luke-warm tea I concluded that it could not be that. But the day was to come when I would react in the same way to the sound of the bell

> and fall upon the food just as ravenously. Like my fellow victims of oppression, I would set to bursting and grow fat, yet always rise hungry from table. It was hunger of the soul, hunger for love, for escape from monotony, for security that we suffered and we tried to allay it by filling our stomachs. Man does not live by bread alone. The truth of those words comes home to you *in captivity*, when you feel you are dying of hunger in the midst of plenty.
> (Ibid, page 41)

This view of *institution* life was first written when Lessing was in prison - where the same applies. The analogy of tamed animals is a contrast with Lessing's view that people in captivity are *like wild animals in cages*: they will run away at the first opportunity.

In January 1929, after two years, Lessing was released from his sentence at the reformatory. (The transcripts of Lessing's later Supreme Court trials list all his previous convictions: the theft at George in 1927 is entered as the first of these.) He was fifteen years old. It would seem that the sentence of two years was so severe because prior to his admission to the Industrial School his father had signed the report saying 'Stoffel is sometimes naughty.' This was considered evidence of his delinquent behaviour. The two year conviction was the formal beginning of Christoffel Lessing's criminal career.

Twenty years later, in February 1947, Lessing was released from his prison cell for the last time. The autobiography that he was engaged in at the time (To What Red Hell) describes in depth the anguish of his life from 1927 until 1947. Lessing had felt like a caged animal - frustrated and undermined. In defying authority and writing about his experiences and his feelings, he was trying to go beyond the bars and locks that kept him a physical prisoner. In writing about the conditions of the prison, as well as the unhappy life he had had outside, he was trying to transcend captivity and in some way, construct a freedom that he could control.

Christoffel Lessing speaks of his life as if he is telling a story. His writing is the same: detailed, descriptive, anecdotal and true to its own moral philosophy.

He relates incidents in great detail, explaining and analysing as he goes along. Lessing is, not surprisingly, critical of the system which kept him in captivity for so long. He has strong views on the changes that can be effected in the prison system.

Lessing's storytelling mode is not unusual among former prisoners. What is unusual is that he wrote his down and published them. After several interviews and informal discussions with former prisoners, it can be concluded that storytelling is a common feature of the conversation of some-time prisoners.

How then did Christoffel Lessing begin to write his stories, and why?

After his release from the reformatory in 1929, Lessing returned to Lydenburg with his father. He was unable to find a job, and began running up debts. In Forth from the Dungeon he relates how one afternoon he drove off in his father's car and was accused of stealing it. As a result, he decided to steal an old car and set off for Mozambique. However, realising that he would not get away, Lessing turned around and went back home.

> Outside the town I was met by the police sergeant, who arrested me.
> Next day I appeared before the magistrate. (...)
> A few days later I appeared in the dock like a wounded animal, longing to creep away into the bush and lick my wounds. (...) "That boy's a good-for-nothing," I heard one whisper. "He's always in trouble." The police produced my record of previous convictions. I had been sent to a reformatory for theft. The magistrate said I had done a wicked thing and sentenced me to four months in prison.
> (Ibid, page 60 - 61)

The story in To What Red Hell is different, and in fact concurs more accurately with the list of previous convictions in the records of the Supreme Court.

In To What Red Hell, Lessing writes that he was given a one month suspended sentence for this theft, because he had turned back home. He was terribly ashamed of this sentence and lived as a hermit, but managed to find a job in a butchery. He had owed the shopkeeper £17, and when the man opened the butchery, he offered Lessing the opportunity of working off his debt. But Lessing extended credit to all the customers and was soon more deeply in debt himself. He was discharged from employment at the same time as his father was transferred from Lydenburg.

Lessing was sent yet again to live with an aunt (the same aunt that he had been sent to after his mother's death), and because he lied to her about his past, he felt ashamed and ran away. He borrowed money from an Indian trader, by posing as a roadmaker, and later ran up debts to the value of £7. When confronted by the trader, who knew he was not a roadmaker, Lessing wrote out a cheque in payment. This behaviour continued for several days, until Lessing was apprehended and charged with passing three false cheques. He was sentenced to three months' imprisonment, and in addition the one month's suspended sentence was brought into effect.

After this sentence was passed in Lydenburg, he spent four months in the Fort, the old Johannesburg prison. He decided that the time had come to uplift himself and determined that on his release he would find a job as a road builder and live an honest life.

However, Lessing was already trapped in a cycle from which he was unable to escape.

On his release, he travelled to Barberton, also in the Eastern Transvaal, in the hope of finding one of his brothers there. He still hoped to find a job on the roads. Embarrassed about his recent release from prison, when he discovered that his brother was no longer in Barberton, Lessing posed as a wealthy businessman and signed fraudulent cheques, hired cars that he was unable

to pay for and was soon arrested. The judge hearing his case sentenced Lessing to two years at the Baviaanspoort Work Colony. This was in approximately 1930.

It was at this point that Lessing first thought about completing his schooling.

> the fact that the judge had not sent me to gaol did much to reconcile me to my punishment, and I began to look around for something to do, other than digging and weeding. I was seized with the idea that this was my chance to straighten out my life. The old desire to study and make something of myself revived.
> "I am going to make up for the lost years," I told myself. "I am going to study for the Junior Matric."
> I wrote to a correspondence college for information and to my father for money. "Please help me," I wrote. "I want to study. I want to go far yet."
> (Ibid, page 74 - 75)

The college replied, his father did not. When he eventually escaped from the work colony, Lessing told his father he had escaped because his father had not replied to his request for money to study.

The events subsequent to his escape led, predictably, to his arrest soon thereafter. As punishment for escaping from the work colony and for stealing a car and crossing into Bechuanaland (now Botswana), Lessing was sentenced to another three years which he was to serve in the Fort. While awaiting trial in Rustenburg, Lessing was visited regularly by a minister, and became a devout Christian as a result. He used his faith as a means of coping with the hardship in the Fort.

As a result of his apparent character change, which involved regular church attendance at the English Church,[26] the last year of Lessing's sentence was to be spent in a monastery, where he was to be trained as a monk.

In many ways, life at the monastery was much like life in prison. The only difference was that there were no bars and locks at the monastery. Needless to say it

did not take very long for Lessing to decide that freedom was not to be found in a monastery. He left yet again, and ended up committing a number of crimes, ranging from car theft to fraud. When apprehended he was told by the detective to give up his life of crime because he was no good at it.

Earlier in this study, the question of "evidential" truth and autobiography was raised. Because a book is described as autobiography, the reader has a right to assume that the content is true. But writers do not always tell their life-stories in full; they sometimes omit incidents or important parts of the tale in order to make their life-stories more readable.

As evidenced in the case of his first jail sentence, Lessing's two versions of his autobiography do differ. In the later text, he did not record that the first sentence was suspended or that the four month sentence was imposed for far more than attempted car theft.

The question to be asked, then, is whom does one trust - the teller or the tale? Although directly relevant at this point to Lessing's work, this question applies as well to the other writers whose work is discussed in this dissertation. Bearing in mind that we are looking at the writings of a man convicted of being a pretender, one trusts neither teller nor tale, but looks further: at least as far as the court records.

In Forth from the Dungeon, when he ran away from the monastery after spending about two weeks there, he tells in one page how he fled to the nearest town, hired a car to take him to Bloemfontein, drove to another town, expressed interest in buying a garage, "bought" petrol on the garage owner's account and defrauded a farmer. He was arrested almost immediately, and when tried, was declared an habitual criminal and sentenced to an indeterminate sentence (which means between five and eight years' imprisonment).

The story in To What Red Hell is largely the same.

> I was charged with the theft of two cars and on two counts of fraud, one being for the petrol I had got under false pretences.
> (To What Red Hell, page 138)

A small, but significant passage follows about how an old offender in the cells had advised Lessing to plead insanity and invent a mad story.

> At his suggestion I told the magistrate that I had inherited a large sum but that certain persons had robbed me of my inheritance. My misdeed, I said, was a deliberate attempt to draw attention to this injustice.
> (Ibid, page 138)

As a result, he was sent to a mental asylum for observation, and escaped from there. He was rearrested within a day and stood trial.

Christoffel Lessing professes not to remember this incident at all (Interview July 1987). Having concentrated chiefly on Forth from the Dungeon, I had not remembered this incident (it was described so fleetingly) until I consulted a copy of the Supreme Court record. The record is intriguing and the number of incidents cited therein lead one to understand why the judge was so harsh as to impose the indeterminate sentence.

Lessing claims, however, throughout his two autobiographies and in oral testimony, that he was forever landing in situations of which he had no understanding. He believes that people made hasty judgements about him without hearing his explanations. This is his feeling about the judge who called him a scoundrel and declared him an habitual criminal. (Lessing has read the court record, including the judge's speech, and says that as far as he remembers, hardly any of it was said out loud in the courtroom.)

The issue of truth is not in fact important to this argument. Of far greater significance is the way in which Lessing has crafted his tale and the fact that he first wrote his autobiography in prison. The story of the inheritance can be regarded as one of Lessing's early attempts at writing fiction.

The passing of the indeterminate sentence was in July 1933. The label "habitual criminal" meant that Lessing was to serve his time without privileges and would not be eligible for parole until at least seven years had passed.

Should he commit any crimes within his probationary period, he would be returned to prison to serve a second indeterminate sentence, regardless of the nature of his misdemeanour. Inevitably, as a result of the cycle in which he was trapped, Lessing served a second indeterminate sentence for a set of small, petty crimes.

It was during his first indeterminate sentence that Lessing finally managed to study for the matric certificate he so badly wanted. When the judge sentenced him, on 18th July 1933, he called him a scoundrel.[27] This left a huge scar on Lessing, who had until this time simply felt hard done by as a result of a disrupted family life. He was determined to prove the judge wrong: the word "scoundrel" had insulted him terribly, and, according to Lessing, his case had received much humiliating newspaper coverage.

Soon after entering Pretoria Central Prison, Lessing began to think seriously about the lack of opportunity in his life.

> I blamed first of all my lack of education and training.
> There was nothing I was fitted for. I had no trade; I could barely read or write. I had got no farther than Standard Five and had not opened a book (except for the Bible) since I had left school.
> (Forth from the Dungeon, page 98)

He was, despite fleeing the monastery, still a devout Christian, and believed very firmly that if he prayed to God and lived a moral Christian life, he would somehow manage to redeem himself, in the eyes of his father, his family, and the prison authorities. Most important, he would appease his own conscience.

Lessing writes of this time in a clear, strong, confident style, in a tone of abject despair, but with an absence of the helplessness that usually accompanies his

despairing passages. He succeeds in conveying that he underwent no mystical spiritual change, had no illusions that God would help him. Instead, he says

> I found no satisfaction in putting the blame on others. To acknowledge that I had pawned my soul to hell because others had treated me cruelly or denied me love was to recognise my own weakness and to accept it as if there was nothing I could do about it.
> Until the early hours of the morning I searched my soul for that weakness. In this self-examination I weighed, according to the light that was given me, the good against the bad in me. The result was tragic: many shortcomings and only one redeeming feature - an unwillingness to identify myself with my own career of delinquency.
> The judge had called me a scoundrel, and so I was. But I did not accept the fact. I was not content to remain a scoundrel.
> (Ibid, page 88)

At this point one wonders whether at the time Lessing's intention in writing of his experiences was a moralistic one, aimed at warning people about the pain of imprisonment and thus urging them to avoid a life of crime.

However, Lessing goes on to explain that once he decided to try and improve his lot by study, his soul felt easier. He was at first detained in isolation, which was the fate of all "blue-coats" or people with indeterminate sentences. Many of the prisoners simply accepted the monotony of their existences. Lessing refused to do so. He writes

> The restricted space made my soul shrink and my thoughts rebounded from the walls and hurt me.
> (Ibid, page 89)

Taking some kind of action, such as studying, and later, writing, was thus a kind of escape from the reality. It was also a means of preventing his soul from shrinking.

During this period, however, Lessing relates that the prison was undergoing a reign of terror.

General Smuts had become Minister of Justice and had appointed General Beyers director of Prisons. They decided to "empty the gaols". Beyers went overseas to study prison systems elsewhere and returned with ideas he had gleaned from a superficial book, The Criminal, by Basil Thompson, ex-superintendent of an English prison. His policy was more severe treatment for the convicted wrongdoer.
(Forth from the Dungeon, page 145)

Punishments that were inflicted on the convicts during this period were more oppressive than ever. They were not allowed to talk to one another except on Sundays. Work was increased while food rations diminished, new prisoners could not write or receive letters for the first six months of their sentences and the length of time spent in the punishment cells was extended. Lessing remarks that the restriction on letters and visits had disastrous consequences: the prisoners lost all contact with their families and friends, and on their release could do little other than return to the prison, where at least they had a roof over their heads and food to eat.

It was against this background that Lessing began a long struggle with the prison authorities to allow him permission to improve his lot in life. He began by securing for himself two dictionaries and some exercise books.

> The librarian allowed me to take one English and one Afrikaans book into my cell, and from five o'clock until eight I applied myself to study until I could read fairly fluently. I tried a grammar book, but could make nothing of it. There was no one to help me. The prison teacher's work was limited to the control of the library. Nevertheless I gained rapidly in knowledge and before a year was out I was anxious to take the matriculation examination.
> (Ibid, page 88)

Thus began the remarkable academic and literary career of Christoffel Lessing. He claims to have been the first convict to sit for a public examination.[28] The

Superintendent of the prison was not keen to allow him to do so, but after much pleading, and petitioning, throughout the period of intense tightening up within the prison, Lessing won his right to enter for his matric exam.

He wrote it in two stages: four subjects at the end of 1936 and the remaining three in June 1937. He passed with one A and three distinctions. (Lessing's matric certificate is appended.) Prior to writing his matric, Lessing had also completed a correspondence course in journalism. He did not write anything worthy of publication, but it was the first time he had done anything of the kind and completed a course. As a consequence of his successful matriculation results

> My success won me a free course for the BA degree. The Social Services paid my fees and people who were unknown to me sent me money to help me with my studies.
> (Ibid, page 92)

In To What Red Hell Lessing reveals

> Because I was a problem to myself, I took psychology as one of my major subjects for the degree. The other was sociology, which I hoped would help me find my place in the community.
> (To What Red Hell, page 150)

Lessing explains how difficult his studies were, both because such ways of thinking and arguing were strange and new to him and because studying within the walls of a prison is very difficult. Nonetheless, he completed his major course and three others, but in 1940, he left his first indeterminate sentence without completing the degree. By then

> My soul was sick and exhausted from the struggle within me. I could not face another book, not even a novel.
> (Forth from the Dungeon, page 93)

"The struggle within him" is a reference to his enormous frustration at being denied the development of his normal sexuality. Lessing had never had the time in

the outside world to develop relationships with women, and was deeply troubled by this. He writes

> I dreaded the unnatural practices to which some men resorted in prison and deliberately shunned the company of my fellow convicts. (...) Sublimation through studying helped but it could not subdue the unruly passions of a maturing man. (...) I became sickly and curo-erotic. [sic]
> When I left the gaol I was full of hope and self-confidence, although deep in my heart I knew I was not equal to my ambitions.
> (Ibid, page 93)

Unfortunately, Lessing was correct; he was not at all equal to his ambitions. He was released and managed to find employment running a book business in Witbank. He met a girl of whom he was very fond, but was disappointed when her father forbade him to see her. The job that he had did not really suit him very well, and he applied eventually to the Roads Department for employment in the Eastern Transvaal, the area in which he had grown up and had been the happiest.

While at the Johannesburg station, awaiting the train that was to take him to Nelspruit, Lessing met a woman who was desperately in need of help. She was five months pregnant, and homeless. Her name was Dolly. The story of Lessing's involvement with Dolly reads like a work of fiction, but is, according to Lessing, absolutely true. The effects she had on his life were felt at least until his release from his second indeterminate sentence and somewhat beyond; she was regarded by many as his wife, and people tried in later years to harass him and his genuine wife on account of Dolly. She was very important in his story, because had he not tried to help her, he might have managed to make a success of his life in 1940 and perhaps would have avoided returning to jail for his second indeterminate sentence. (Had he not returned for the second sentence, however, it is unlikely that Lessing would ever have written so prolifically. Indeed, he may

never have chosen to write of his experiences, since he was tired of study and contemplation at the time of his release in 1940 [quoted above].)

Lessing describes his meeting with Dolly as follows:

> As I passed a bench, I heard a stifled sob and looked down into a pale face and a pair of tearful brown eyes. I stopped. Damsel in distress!
> (Ibid, page 97)

Dolly told Lessing that she was pregnant as a result of an affair with a married man. She had left home in shame and had nowhere to go.

> A scoundrel, who had never been in prison, had done this crime. I would show him how a woman in her condition should be treated!
> (Ibid, page 97)

Not thinking at all of his own inadequate circumstances, Lessing offered to help Dolly. He basically meant that he would help her to get home and explain her situation to her parents. However, the years in prison had not done anything to his naivete. Lessing was horrified that Dolly's father could have assumed that he was the father of her unborn child, especially after he explained that he had been in prison for the past seven years. He was even more surprised when, after he had been a few days in Nelspruit, Dolly arrived at his boarding house and moved in with him, claiming to be his wife! The surprise turned to horror when he realised that he would have to pay double the original rental for this "privilege", and would overspend his monthly salary by two pounds on board alone.

> I drew the line at marriage but allowed her to stay. It caused me embarrassment at work. My chief asked when I had got married, because my application had described me as single. I suggested that there had been an error in the information sent to him, but he knew this was not true.
> (Ibid, page 99)

Meanwhile, Lessing's finances were already in somewhat of a hopeless state. Before travelling to Nelspruit, he had tried to ensure that Dolly was provided for, and had overdrawn on his newly opened bank account, although he had written to the manager requesting time to pay. When he arrived in Nelspruit he was broke, but hoped to survive once he began working. It soon became apparent that this was not to happen.

> The £10 I was to get at the end of the month would not cover our board. A letter from the bank demanded immediate payment of £8. Meanwhile I had borrowed a further £8 from a local attorney to pay what I still owed for my lodgings in Witbank.
> I wrote to a man in Pretoria who was well-disposed towards us, and asked him to deposit the £8 for me with the bank, but he not only refused but called on the bank manager and told him I had been in gaol.
> (Ibid, page 99)

Within a few days, Lessing tried to get a loan from the bank in Nelspruit, although he realised that at the end of the month he would have to repay all his debts. From then on it was a question of time before he was sent back to prison for a second indeterminate sentence.

Lessing writes that he realised with a sick feeling that he was once again on the road to prison. He knew that he would serve a second indeterminate sentence, even if his crime was minimal. For this reason, he relates how he and Dolly were well provided for for their flight from Nelspruit. The Supreme Court record of Lessing's trial (once he was apprehended) outlines the risks he took to ensure that his return to prison was at least, in his terms, justified. He cashed cheques, bought clothing for Dolly's unborn child, and overdrew on his bank account. He tried as well to ensure that he remained free until Dolly was accommodated in a nursing home for the birth of her baby. The entire story reads like a fantasy, but Lessing

proclaims its truth and continues to tell it flawlessly, without adding or omitting any part of it.

By the time Lessing was brought to trial in Nelspruit in 1941, he was charged on four counts of passing fraudulent cheques, pretending to be a man of greater means than he was, and of twice escaping from custody. In passing sentence, the judge said that he understood the great desire to be free and, seeing that Lessing had admitted to escaping from custody, he would be lenient on that count. Nonetheless it still counted for one year of the sentence. The four counts of signing cheques which in fact had little financial value show to what extent Lessing's association with Dolly caused him to behave rashly and stupidly, ensuring that he was caught.

Lessing's descriptions of the time spent with Dolly and the ensuing panic when he tried to run away from what he had done, are presented in very few pages of his autobiography. There are two reasons for this. The first, which is the one Lessing himself would probably give, is that the issue was no longer important to his story, and he was dealing with it in passing so that he could get to a more interesting aspect of his life. The other reason, which is more of a literary one, is the way Lessing had learnt to conserve his words to build up a breathlessness and a sense of the blind panic he was in. This kind of style seems very much in keeping with the way Lessing describes his feelings at the time.

He captures, in his haste to tell the story, the anxiety and fear that he was feeling at his recklessness, which was bound to return him to prison.

In Forth from the Dungeon the period from the time he began to "provide for" Dolly until the time of his capture is dealt with in two pages. In these two pages he describes the various frauds he committed and their departure from Nelspruit on the evening train. He tells how he left Dolly at her parents and went to Natal to find a job. He was foolish enough to write to her and let her

know that he was in Ladysmith. She followed him there and when she could not find him she went to the police for help.

> The detective who was put in charge of the investigation turned up the Police Gazette - and there it was! Christoffel Lessing was wanted on four counts of fraud in Nelspruit. Dolly confirmed that we had been in Nelspruit. The detective took a look round, and by evening the handcuffs were on my wrists.
> (Ibid, page 101.)

It is not made clear, in either text, to what extent Dolly knew of the fraud Lessing was committing or what her own involvement in it was.

Shortly thereafter, Lessing escaped from the police escort at the Germiston railway station and when caught yet again, made a key and escaped from the jail in Nelspruit. Years later he describes the way he made the key and how he escaped from the prison. The story is itself rather interesting,[29] but at this point it will suffice to say that Lessing was so utterly bored and frustrated by the meaninglessness of the prison that he had to create something in order to get out of it. In a sense the key that he managed to manufacture can be said to be comparable to the words he wrote later as another form of escape from the frustration and boredom of custody. Indeed in Lessing's case, as well as in the cases of many of the writers discussed in this study, writing forms a metaphor for the escape that they all wished they could achieve. In Lessing's case, he managed both the literal and the literary escape.

As already mentioned, in this last case the actual number of years to which Lessing was sentenced was irrelevant, for it automatically invoked the indeterminate sentence for which he was still under parole. The judge in fact only sentenced Lessing to three years, but he was required to serve a minimum of eight.

> The fact that the judge had refused to impose that iniquitous sentence proved that he did not regard me as a completely hopeless case. This helped me in no small measure to retain my faith in myself.
> (Ibid, page 102)

The humiliation that Lessing endured on his return to Pretoria Central was considerable:

> The warder ordered a prisoner to give me a rag and directed me to polish the iron trellis in the hall. The hall was a passage way to all parts of the gaol, and warders and prisoners who passed through stopped to look at me. They shook their heads, and some laughed derisively. "Crux's model convict, B.A., bah!" they sneered. (...) The pain in my soul made my throat constrict.
> (Ibid, page 103)

The return to prison was utterly devastating for Lessing. His appeal to the *authorities for permission* to resume his studies was rejected, and was in fact scoffed at. Crux, the prison superintendent, told him that he had abused his chance, and was not to be allowed to study at all. The effects of this restriction on Lessing were devastating. He describes at length the anguish he suffered as a result of the deprivation of intellectual stimulus and the intense spiritual and psychological guilt he suffered at the hands of his conscience.

The pages in which Lessing describes this period of his imprisonment are, like the ones in which he remembered his childhood, full of over-written sentimentality. However, in order to convey to his readers the intensity of such *feeling*, there was no other way he could find to write his highly emotional feelings. His imagery consists of "gaping precipices", "groping for light", and similar clichéd images presented against the harsh concrete reality of the warders and fellow prisoners, and his recurrent fear of insanity.

The fear of insanity, and indeed the actual occurrence of such trauma, is portrayed almost without exception by writers who describe their imprisonment. Insanity, madness, trauma, and suicide attempts are part of the vast stores of emotional reserves which people in prisons are forced to draw upon in order to survive their abnormal existences. (These themes will recur in all further discussions.)

In Lessing's case, his "insanity" took the form of anorexia nervosa, an illness which today is known as one which affects mainly adolescent girls with particular family dynamics and a specific combination of personality traits.

When he was diagnosed as anorexic, very few people knew about the illness, and it was certainly not known as the "slimmers' disease" as it is today. He was simply told, and agreed with the diagnosis, that he was losing such enormous quantities of weight because he was mentally distressed.[30] The causes of his severe mental distress were never adequately examined or treated, although Lessing's own interest in and knowledge of psychology was helpful to him in overcoming much of the anxiety and the depression.

He knew that in order to stave off madness, he had to keep himself busy. Such a task is not easy in a prison, where boredom and frustration occur not only after lock up time, but throughout the meaningless tasks prisoners have to perform. (At this point, Lessing was working in the stone yard.)

Bosman describes the way he used to crawl around on his hands and knees in order to pass the time when he was "feeling insane", and how he welcomed a transfer to the stone yard because there he could fill his time with hard physical labour.

Lessing felt much the same way. He had to work. But after several months

> I had become an automaton. I worked mechanically and, like a well-trained ox, without exercise of will. The war between myself and my conscience was at its crisis and I was barely conscious of my earthly existence.
> (Ibid, page 104)

He requested that he be placed in solitary confinement and be allowed to sew mailbags as a form of self-inflicted punishment as well as an opportunity for introspection.

Immediately after this description of himself, Lessing lapses once again into clichés and describes the beginnings of his spiritual awakening.

I quote at length to convey the extent of the sentimentality as well as its importance to the style that Lessing was to develop as he continued to write.

> Then in August the winds came and the plants awoke from their winter sleep. An echo of the *stirrings* of nature sounded within me. The winds of my spirit moved, and the withered, dying trees in my arid soul quivered and groaned. Every gust of wind tugged at their roots, loosening them from the grip of the wintry earth. The earth itself, a faded idealism, lay ready for the nourishment of the first spring rains.
> But I did not understand the purpose of those storms in my spirit. Like a drowning man in a stormy sea I thought: "It is the end. I perish!"
> (Ibid, page 104)

Shortly after this, Lessing began to have memories of the Reverend Cronje, the man who had taught him about God when he was awaiting trial in Rustenburg prison, and who had been influential in encouraging Lessing to study. Lessing believed that the spiritual strength which Cronje had instilled in him was fragile but had not yet disappeared. He wanted to reawaken it in some way, but he was lost as to how. He describes the period as one in which he was waiting for a momentous self-discovery to occur. In order to wait peacefully, he had requested isolation from the other prisoners.

The crucial moment came at Christmas time 1941, approximately one and a half years after he had returned to prison. Lessing had spent every Christmas since he was fifteen in either a prison cell or some other place of confinement. Christmas for Lessing was not a celebration, it was the time when he felt most neglected and unloved, for he never had any visitors or received gifts. That particular Christmas, he felt forgotten, hard done by and utterly miserable.

In a lengthy passage in Forth from the Dungeon, he sets the scene for the significant turn his life was to take. The passage reflects both his anguish and his excitement at his renewed spiritual strength. Lessing describes the silence of the prison and the distant sounds of *the city beyond the walls. He* heard the carol-singers outside the prison gates, and realised for the first time in his life that, for a believer, Christmas had a very special message.

He continued his introspection and felt as if he underwent *a spiritual rebirth; he believed that he was* in some way released from the trap he had been caught in.

> I knelt on my mat and thanked Christ for His love and for the spirit within me which could break but refused to die. I begged Him to take over the direction of my life. The prayer *brought* the conviction that He was already doing so. The walls were still around me but I was free ... free in a prison cell!
> (Ibid, page 107)

David Goldblatt writes of Lessing's experience that

> ... although pivotal to his subsequent development, Lessing hardly refers to this event again and makes no attempt at preaching born again Christian precepts. However he had changed profoundly.
> (op cit, page 17)

Lessing wanted to share his new found strength with somebody, but knew that he would be mocked and scorned by the other prisoners if he spoke about his faith and quoted from the testaments as he had done once before. (The last

time had resulted in his removal from the prison to the priory from which he escaped, only to receive an indeterminate sentence.)

> Instead I wrote an article entitled "Christmas night in a prison cell". I made no attempt to get it published, for I knew it was against the rules.
> (Fourth from the Dungeon, page 108)

Thus began the writing career of prisoner Christoffel Lessing. "Christmas night in a prison cell" was not published then, but an article describing his new discovery of himself was published in the magazine Buisgenoot, as part of a series on "what life had taught". In order to bypass prison censorship, his article took the form of a letter to the editor. He was writing openly and under his own name. The article was called "An Opportunity to Serve - By a Convict". The prison authorities seemed to take favourably to the activity of writing, and even supplied him with stationery.

> The Governor took a new interest in me. Every day when his rounds of inspection brought him to our office he would exchange a few words with me and ask how my writing was getting on. Sometimes he sent me writing paper. It was wartime and paper was almost unobtainable.
> (Ibid, page 109)

Lessing describes the way he went about pursuing his new "career".

> I could not afford to buy any [paper], and when I got a present of a few exercise books I used each one three times over for rough work - first in pencil, then in ink and finally in red ink with the book turned sideways. Sometimes Mr Crux would read some of my literary efforts and write his comments in the margin.
> (Ibid, page 109)

Lessing had been a student of psychology when he studied for his BA and was keen to continue with this field of study. The authorities refused his permission to do so, saying that he had abused this privilege

previously. After some time, determined to use the remainder of his sentence productively, Lessing began an independent study, without permission, but with the cooperation of his fellow inmates. He started by collecting and documenting the dreams of the prisoners, in order to make a thorough study of them in a dissertation.

> I thought I would start preparing a dissertation on the psychology of the criminals' dreams. I wrote portions of it, quite a lengthy dissertation, and I sent it out to Professor Willemse, piecemeal. Then he got so interested in it he came to see me. We started talking ... (Interview, October 1986)

Professor W A Willemse was perhaps the most important figure in Lessing's subsequent success as a writer and his becoming a "rehabilitated" member of society. He was the head of the Department of Psychology at Pretoria University and was interested in gathering data about criminals for a book he planned to write. (This book, Mislukte Lewens, was published soon after he began visiting Lessing.[31]

Three days after Lessing sent the manuscript to Willemse (with the knowledge of the prison superintendent) the Professor came to visit him. He was the first visitor Lessing had had in many years, and visited once a month for some time.

> He thought that my studies on crime could be of great value, from a scientific as well as a literary point of view. The first few chapters of my own life story, which were among the manuscripts I sent him, also struck him as very interesting, and he thought I had a lively literary style. His praise came as a surprise. (Ibid, page 110)

Willemse not only expressed interest in Lessing's work on the dreams of the prisoners, but was keen to help him publish as much as possible of his autobiographical and creative material. He took out articles after visits

and gleaned material from amongst the dreams. This material was published in a variety of magazines under the pseudonym Bastiaan Strauss.

Willemse encouraged Lessing to write his autobiography. In his book, Mislukte Lewens, [Failed Lives], Willemse arranged for some of Lessing's writing to appear in the book in the form of an autobiography.

The autobiographical piece by Bastiaan Strauss, titled "Twintig jaar in die tronk", was the first really lengthy piece of writing that Lessing had undertaken, and can be regarded as his first published work. ("Twintig jaar in die tronk" tells the story of Lessing's youth in much the same way as he told it later when he wrote Forth from the Dungeon and To What Red Hell.)

Willemse added his own comments on Lessing in the book and included some of the studies Lessing had made of the dreams. He described Lessing as "the gifted [geniale] man who knows more about the soul of the criminal than anyone else in South Africa, and perhaps the world". (Forth from the Dungeon, page 111)

For some months, Lessing continued writing (he doesn't reveal exactly what he was writing at this stage, but most of it was probably about the dreams, and life histories of other prisoners, until he began writing Na Kleredige Hemp [To What Red Hell] seriously). Occasionally, articles of his, under the name Bastiaan Strauss, were published in magazines. The articles were increasingly critical of the prison system, and the authorities were becoming less pleased. At the same time, Willemse's book was published, and it too contained a number of criticisms of the prison. As a result, Willemse was denied access to Lessing and his letters and visits stopped.

In time, prison personnel changed and few people knew the real identity of Bastiaan Strauss, who continued to publish articles, although by then he had to smuggle them

out. Those who suspected Lessing would not accuse him openly of breaking the rules, until one article appeared which incensed them. It dealt with the issue of execution and told of three black prisoners who were to be executed during the Christmas season. In response to this article, ("Kersfees in die skadu van die galg" - Huisgenoot, 1945) Lessing was called for questioning.

> There was this one warder whom I had encouraged to study for his matric. And he was the one who had to investigate the authorship of that article. And he says "I know you wrote it Lessing. It's your style." And I replied that I didn't know I had one.
> (Interview, October 1986)

Soon after that, Lessing was allowed to continue with his writing provided that he submit everything for censorship. He did this with anything that he intended for immediate publication, but hid much of his autobiography in the tailor-shop in which he worked.

One Saturday, about a year after the ban on Willemse's visits, Lessing was summoned for a visit, and found the Professor. It was the last time they saw each other, because a few days later the Professor was run over by a car and died without regaining consciousness.32

Lessing was extremely distressed by the death of his mentor, and recalls it as follows.

> The news was a great shock to me. I felt faint and had to grip the governor's desk to prevent myself from swooning. My only friend and the man who had been the strongest influence for good in my life was gone. I felt empty and lost.
> (Forth from the Dungeon, page 112)

Lessing was still to receive a letter from the Professor, written just after the visit. In the letter, Willemse outlined for Lessing the hopes he had for his success, and the wish that he would be released to lead a "normal" life.

The Professor's letter filled Lessing with a variety of emotions that both pleased and distressed him. He was particularly touched by the late Professor's faith that he would make good in the world and his concern that Lessing marry and have children. However, Lessing was terrified of the full import of Willemse's words. He did not think there would be any women willing to enter into a relationship with him.

Lessing writes that the Professor's words affected him so profoundly that he could think of little else. He dreamed constantly of the kind of woman with whom he would like to establish a romantic relationship and a family. All this time, he continued writing the autobiography that he had begun with Willemse's help. Although the prison authorities stopped censoring his writing after Willemse's death, Lessing knew that his autobiography was not really safe from their regulations. He took pains to hide it in the workshop of the master tailor. The tailor, a German immigrant whom Lessing had helped with his English, ignored Lessing's secretive activities, and not only encouraged his writing efforts but helped him to smuggle some of the material to Willemse. The tailor-warder thus ignored Lessing's growing bundle of chapters. It was already 1946, and Lessing had served a long stretch of his second indeterminate sentence.

By this time, Lessing had gained a particular status within the prison. He was no longer confined by choice to his cell, and had relatively free access to sections and was trusted by his jailers to collect and deliver letters for prisoners. As a tailor, it was his job to ensure that prisoners who were to be released had their clothing ready in time. On 13th February 1946, he went to the reception area of the prison on legitimate tailor-shop business to enquire about a release date.

> This also happened to be the office in which prisoners' letters were censored. As I entered, one of the two warders on duty was busy reading

letters. He took one from the pile of unopened letters and read aloud the name on the envelope. "Bastiaan Strauss - have we got anyone with that name here?" he murmured.
(Ibid, page 114)

Lessing received an enormous shock, but did not show any sign of this to the warders. He merely listened. The conversation of the warders and the contents of the letter were so incredibly fascinating that Lessing had difficulty restraining himself. He managed to edge close to the warder and read the address at the top of the page. He memorised the address and the name of the writer, in the event that the governor might refuse to show it to him.

The writer of the letter was Corrie de Beer, a school-teacher from Johannesburg. She had read about Lessing in Mislukte Lewens, Professor Willemse's book, and had found spiritual and moral value in the teachings of Lessing's (or rather Bastiaan Strauss') life story. She was looking for some good deed to do, especially in the case of a needy person, and for a way to give her life some meaning. Knowing that the Professor had died, Corrie de Beer decided to offer her services to Bastiaan Strauss as editor, typist, or liaison between himself and publishers, or to help him in any way she could to enable him to continue writing and publishing his work.

In a magazine article she wrote two years later, Corrie de Beer describes exactly why she chose Lessing as the subject of her "good deed".

> I prayed Providence for someone who really needed me, and who would be a "soul mate" to me. (...) I was prepared (and expressed as much in my prayers) to be "eyes to the blind or feet to a cripple". Little did I know to whom Providence would send me.
> (The Outspan, 30th January 1948, page 35)

Later in the same article, she explains how, after reading Lessing's biography, she

> (s)uddenly ... knew the meaning and purpose of my existence.
> (Ibid)

One of the warders on duty knew that Lessing used to write, and soon made the connection. However, they refused to give him the letter, as the warder remembered that Lessing had once been forbidden to receive Professor Willemse's visits or letters. He remembered as well that Lessing had criticised the prison system and was in fact restrained from writing. The warder said that they would have to show the letter to the governor and leave the decision to him. The governor refused to pass the letter on to Lessing, saying that he would get it on his release.

The only solution was to smuggle a letter to the address he had memorised. If ever there was a crucial turning point in Lessing's life (there were several, but none as significant as this one) it was the letter he wrote to Corrie de Beer.

In the letter, he explained very briefly that he had not received her letter and revealed to her his true identity. Within a few days, he received a letter from Corrie de Beer, via the prison governor. De Beer was outraged that her letter had not reached Lessing, and sent a second one directly to the prison governor, requesting in a covering letter that he pass her letter on to Lessing.

The governor allowed Lessing to receive the letters on condition that De Beer made no attempts to publish any of his writing. He was under the illusion that she was already in possession of some of Lessing's manuscripts.

In To What Red Hell, Corrie de Beer's correspondence with Lessing, her subsequent visits and their romance are described in less than three pages.

In the remaining page and a half, Lessing's descriptions of Corrie and her kindness are sickly sweet, full of cliché. He wrote of her as a metaphoric housekeeper, cleaning and repairing an unoccupied house (himself), despite warnings that it was inhabited by the

devil. He believed that her arrival in his life was a perfect replacement for the mother's love he had lost as a child:

> With the coming of Corrie my childish longing was absorbed in the strength of a man. The child in me had grown up and the conflict was at an end.
> (Ibid, page 188)

The speed with which he tried to draw the book to a close emphasises the frustration he felt at his continued imprisonment. He was eager to leave the prison and never return, so eager that he temporarily abandoned his regard for writing style and simply [illegible] to finish the book.
In an interview Lessing said

> I wrote it in my cell, lying flat on my tummy. I was afraid that if the warders knew I was writing so much they would want to see it.

As he progressed with the book, he became increasingly sick with anxiety and terrified that he would be discovered.

Although Lessing had been writing for several years, he seems not to have felt this fear before. He had always written because he felt the need to say something about his imprisonment, but he had never really worried that if caught out, the consequences would harm him. Now, with Corrie outside and a potential future in the real world, he was terrified that his dreams and plans would be destroyed.

In Forth from the Dungeon Lessing takes far more time to describe the arrival of the letters from Corrie and her first visit. Many more pages are devoted to the faith she showed in him and to the support she offered in her efforts to have him released on parole before the expiry of his indeterminate sentence.

When first she wrote to Lessing via the prison governor, Corrie was warned that she was not to publish

anything that Lessing had written. The authorities did not seem to realise that she had genuinely never met Lessing and did not at that stage have any *of his* manuscripts in her possession. The more Corrie wrote, the more *Lessing* dreamed of the special woman who would make his life worthwhile. He dreamed that he would one day leave prison and marry and have a conventional family life. As he learned more about Corrie through her letters, he hoped that she would be the woman of his dreams. After he asked her to visit him, Lessing began to fall in love with an image. He describes their first meeting as follows:

> I judged her age to be about twenty-five or twenty-six, and that turned out to be right. Her face was *thin and rather* tense, indicating a serious disposition and a life that had not been easy. Her blonde hair was brushed across an unusually broad forehead, and her large, clear blue eyes glanced around alertly as if to take in her surroundings at once. (...) I paused at the door scarcely daring to breath. Then I tugged my jacket straight and went in.
> (Forth from the Dungeon, page 116)

Lessing writes that their meeting was natural and very friendly, as if they knew each other well and had not seen one another for a long time.

> She stood before me in all her loveliness - with her challenging blue eyes and golden hair. My manhood still slumbered within me, but my soul looked into those eyes and recognised them for Corrie was the woman whose image I had seen in the star four years before. She was my dream mate.
> (To What Red Hell, page 187)

After the *visit* they continued the correspondence and arranged a second visit the following month. This time, Corrie was to be accompanied by a former student of Professor Willemse's, who was also interested in Lessing's story and wanted to work on it further. After this visit, Corrie wrote Lessing a letter, which she smuggled in to him, outlining what the psychologist had told her about

Lessing and the small chance of his successful "rehabilitation". She told him that she had struggled to make a decision about continuing her association with him and revealed that she was willing to try anything for Lessing's sake because she was in love with him. They had developed an intriguing relationship, after knowing one another only through letters and two visits.

Although only allowed a certain number of letters per month, Lessing and Corrie had established an efficient smuggling method[33] and wrote virtually every day. Their correspondence, published in a book called Met 'n Donkbare Liefdeswoek, reflects the agony they went through over the next year, while they made decisions and plans for their future. They had exchanged several letters since the one in which Corrie had revealed her feelings by the time she next came to visit "her Chris".

> She came on the first Sunday of the following month. When I entered the visitors' room she was waiting for me behind the door. She was wearing a beautiful mauve dress, and her face was flushed and expectant. I held out my arms to her, and she approached shyly. I drew her to me and the next moment our lips met and the wardens and other visitors vanished from our minds. In the prison which had taken so much of my life I had won for the first time a woman's love. It was like a dream.
> (Ibid., page 119)

Much of Lessing's writing has a dream-like quality, in that his story seems to follow the pattern of his own wishes and desires, which somehow come true.

It is at no stage clear from Fourth from the Dungeon whether Lessing wrote with the specific intention of modifying reality in order to help the plot flow. It is unclear to what extent he lived in a world of fantasy, invented to pass the time and keep sane. Often, coincidence makes the tale difficult to believe but in all instances of his narrative about Corrie, his story holds.

Corrie, for example, granted interviews and wrote several magazine articles of her own describing the unusual romance.[34]

For the remainder of the visit the pair spoke not only of their new happiness, but of the books that Corrie wanted Lessing to complete. He had already smuggled out many pieces, such as the life-stories of other prisoners, and chapters of the first autobiography (Ek Ellendige Mens), and she was encouraging him to complete this, as she had found a publisher. In his excitement, Lessing says

> That evening I tackled the last part of my magnum opus. It was no easy task. All the chapters about my life in jail had still to be written, and there was more than an element of risk. The warder peered into my cell at night, and if he reported that I was always busy writing, my cell might be visited. I shuddered to think of the punishment I would get if the authorities read what I had written about life behind the bars.
> (Ibid, page 120)

The idea of earning a living from writing on his release germinated when the publishers of the first two books, Ek Ellendige Mens and Gooi My vir die Aasvoels offered Corrie an advance of $120. From this money, she bought herself a diamond ring and she and Lessing announced their engagement.

As happy as he was feeling about Corrie, the suddenness of her appearance in his life affected Lessing in more ways than he understood at the time. The immediate effect was one of boundless energy for writing about his life. Part of this desire was to show Corrie what he had been through since childhood. He also wanted her to know everything about him, including his enigmatic liaison with Dolly.

In Forth from the Dungeon he makes a comment about the reasons for the inferiority of the end of To What Red Hell:

> It released hidden powers in me and I went to work with unexpected energy. Within a few weeks I had completed in novel form the life stories of three of my fellow prisoners, and smuggled them out chapter by chapter in the same way as I had previously smuggled out letters.
> (Ibid, page 119)

Shortly after announcing their engagement, Corrie persuaded Lessing to approach the Prisons Board about an early release.

Lessing was reluctant to do so in case they turned him down. However, at Corrie's insistence, he applied for parole, but he was devastated when they refused to release him.

> "Are you going to deprive [illegible] of this chance?" I panted. "Are you going to allow me to risk losing the girl who believes in me ... You can't do this to me. I shall never have such a chance again."
> (Ibid, page 122)

For some weeks the Board made things very unpleasant and persistently insinuated that Lessing was the father of an "illegitimate" child, trying to dissuade Corrie from continuing her relationship with him. To what extent their cruelty and blatant lack of faith in his rehabilitation were a result of their anger at the number of articles he had already published, and fear of how much more he might reveal about the prison, were he to continue writing on his release, remains speculation. However, it is likely that the Prisons Board were all in some way threatened by the potential successes awaiting Lessing. Lessing was denied freedom because the people in control of it claimed to be afraid that he would revert to committing petty fraud and stealing motor cars.

Between September 1946 and February 1947, Lessing and Connie were in anguish, awaiting a final decision about his release date.

Eventually, on 8th February 1947, Lessing was freed from prison for the last time. He and Connie were married that morning and lived happily together until her death in 1971. Their lives were complicated by harassment (parole officers, detectives and other officials called on them continuously), and by an unsteady income. Lessing changed jobs several times, but kept writing for some years.

After he was released, Lessing's publishers offered him a job as a salesman, a job for which he needed a car. He borrowed money and proudly relates that he repaid his loan within four months. Shortly thereafter, the books began to come out and were selling very well. The magazine which had planned to serialise Lessing's autobiography, Brandeis, offered him a £20 per month retainer, and he began to write full time again.

Although not all Lessing's writing was about prison, it was all based on the experiences of the previous twenty years of his life. At first he wrote mostly autobiography, but later developed a few series of short stories about criminals, and later wrote a series about people he knew in prison.[35]

Much of what he was writing was obviously not well received by the prison authorities, who at one point threatened to withdraw his parole. Eventually Lessing was asked not to publish further criticisms of the prison system at least until the end of his probationary period.

> I also had to endure a good deal of abuse from literary critics who envied me my success. One of these wrote about my books that "only boys and girls who are themselves on the road of crime would read such stories".
> (Ibid, page 130)

However, the majority of feedback that Lessing received was favourable. He received comments from

teachers, doctors, legal people, criminologists, even warders. All thanked him for exposing what he had about the prison system and its effects. It seems that the response was to the exposure of the prison conditions and the anguish of one incarcerated in such a place. It was a response to the morality which Lessing has espoused since his realisation that he had to make a success of his life. It was not an acknowledgement that Lessing had exposed the foulness of the very nature of the prison system. *People responded to the personal success story.*

What was Lessing's reason for writing? Primarily writing was therapeutic

> but afterwards, when I started adapting to social life, I outgrew it. I lost interest in writing about prison.
> (Interview, October 1986)

But he also had a strong desire to expose the conditions in South African prisons. When Lessing arrived at Pretoria Central in 1933 there had been a general tightening up of the regulations, which he describes in To What Red Hell (quoted earlier).

At one point, while still in prison, Lessing wrote pieces in which he described the unnecessary deaths and illnesses of the prisoners - most of which he is planning to publish only now, in 1988, in a new book, Skeletons in the Cupboard.[36]

Lessing continues writing, although he stopped for some years, once he felt that the therapeutic value of his work was no longer necessary. However, when awaiting his release in 1947, he began to worry about how he could ever continue to write ... not that he thought he would have no encouragement and inspiration, but he worried constantly that the prison authorities would harass him and prevent him from earning a living. As mentioned above, this is exactly what happened, but after some months, when he and his wife were settling down to their lives and earning a meagre living, they got bold enough to confront the

Prison's Board and demand that they be left in peace. To a large extent, they were. But for many years after, people tried to blackmail Lessing, accused him of lying *about the experiences*, and attempted to damage the positive future that he and Corrie were building for themselves.37

Corrie continued teaching while Lessing wrote for the Brandwag, travelled through the country giving lectures about his experiences and struggled to find a more lucrative income. After several unfortunate financial setbacks, Lessing was offered employment by the Department of Social Welfare.

In 1952 Lessing was appointed clerk at the Daeraad settlement for the elderly, a project of the Department. They were happy although not financially secure. Lessing yearned for a more challenging post. He trusted himself enough to realise that the Department of Social Welfare would recognise that he was capable of more, and was longing for this. His superior at the settlement was transferred to a work colony, a place for prisoners like Baviaanspoort, the one where Lessing himself had once been confined. Shortly thereafter, Lessing, who had been increasingly unhappy at the settlement since the departure of Theron, his former superior, was summoned by the Department of Social Welfare and informed that they were appointing him assistant superintendent at the Sonderwater Work Colony. He knew from the start that he would encounter severe hostility, both from the inmates and the personnel, but was ready for the challenge.

In Forth from the Dungeon, Lessing claims to be the first ex-convict to have been appointed to a responsible position in a South African penal institution. *This is in* fact not true; Nongoloza, or Jan Note, was the first.38

The Lessings remained at the colony for some years, and Lessing was at last satisfied and fulfilled. He did not write at all during this period, as the job took most

of his time. However, when he finally left the colony and the Department of Social Welf ' , once the hostility of fellow employees got too much for him, he embarked on the reworking of his autobiography and he devoted many pages of it (about one-third to a half of the book) to the years he spent working at Sonderwater.

Lessing then took up a position as public relations officer for an airline, and stayed there some years. He began earning a reasonable income and he and Corrie were satisfied with their lives. He was working on the updated autobiography when he met a German film producer who was keen to make a movie of Lessing's life story. The various authorities in the country, from those in the prisons' services to those in positions of seniority in film companies, were not willing to grant them the permission they needed. The project was abandoned, but Lessing says

> One day someone will make that film ... it will probably be long after my death, but they'll make it.
> (Interview, 1987)

Lessing's matric certificate

M.E. 47/30230 T.E. 107 (b).

Union of South Africa — Unie van Suid-Afrika

UNION DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
UNIE-ONDERWYSDEPARTEMENT

National Senior Certificate
Nasionale Sertifikaat

(STANDARD X)
(STANDERD X)

AWARDED TO :: TOEGEKEN AAN

CHRISTOPH. LESSING

November / NOVEMBER 1937

Subjects	Vakke
ENGLISH A	ENGELS A
AFRIKAANS B (DIST)	AFRIKAANS B (ONDERSK)
COMMERCE	HANDEL
ECONOMICS	EKONOMIK
GEOLOGY (DIST)	GEOLOGIE (ONDERSK)
GEOGRAPHY (DIST)	AARDRYKSKUNDE (ONDERSK)
HISTORY	GESKIEDENIS

****

Date of issue / Datum van uitreiking: 2 JAN. 1938

Examinations Officer, Eksamensbeampte. — Secretary for Education, Sekretaris van Onderwys.

This candidate is exempted from the Matriculation Examination of the Witwatersrand Technical College and the Transvaal University College.

Universities of South Africa.
van Suid-Afrika se universiteite

Secretary / Joint Matriculation Board,
Sekretaris / Gemeenskaplike Matrikulasieraad.

M.E./1,625—9-12-6—1,000.

Chapter Two

> The prison songs fascinated me. I felt they could have been composed only in a prison. And I felt that the right place for singing them was within the walls of a prison...
> And if I have succeeded in conveying nothing of the misery of prison existence, the soul-killing monotony, the bleak gloom and brutality, then I am very glad. Because these are things that nobody should pen. For one thing, you can't. You only make a fool of yourself if you try.
> (Cold Stone Jug, page 68)

Herman Charles Bosman published Cold Stone Jug in 1949, at least two years after the appearance of Lessing's Ek Kliendige Mens.1 While Lessing's books claim to be autobiographies, Bosman's is simply "A chronicle: being the unimpassioned record of a somewhat lengthy sojourn in prison" (subtitle). Cold Stone Jug is not an autobiography, but it is an autobiographical novel. It is rooted in fact, but is a masterly translation of fact into fiction. The book is both humorous and serious, the tone often ironic. In its more directly serious parts, the agony of Bosman's imprisonment is blatant.

Herman Charles Bosman was sentenced to death in November 1926 for the murder of his stepbrother, David Russell.2 After he had spent ten days in the condemned cell, in the gallows wing of Pretoria Central Prison, Bosman's sentence was commuted to ten years hard labour.3 He served three years and nine months of his sentence, and once released spoke very little about the experience.4 Cold Stone Jug, written approximately twenty years after his release, was one of the few open references Bosman made to his imprisonment.5

Prior to his imprisonment, Bosman, born at Kuils River in 1905, had lived most of his life in Johannesburg, with his parents and his brother Pierre. His father, an Afrikaans-speaking miner, died in a mining accident in approximately 1925. His mother married again, this time to a Scot, William Russell, who had several adult children of his own. The two families lived in a small house in Isipingo Street, Bellevue, Johannesburg. There was a considerable degree of tension between Herman and Pierre Bosman on the one hand, and David Russell, their stepbrother, on the other.[6] Herman and David shared a bedroom.

At this stage of his life, Bosman was completing his university studies[7] against a background of pranks, mischief and serious literary endeavour.[8] The types of pranks he played were childish and often irresponsible, but seemed always to have been undertaken in a spirit of great fun. Several of Bosman's friends, e.g. Bernard Sachs (who was at Jeppe Boys' High School with Bosman) and Aegidius Jean Nijgaard[9] (Bosman's business partner and fellow pranster in later years), "testify to his intensity and wildness; to his pursuit of excitement and laughter that more than once got him into trouble." (Abrahams, 1981, page 4.)

One such prank, for example, was his joining the Communist Party's Young Communist League - chiefly because it provided him with a forum for fun; he enjoyed heckling at meetings, regardless of who was speaking.[10]

In 1926 Bosman completed his studies and prepared to take up a teaching post in the Marico district of the Western Transvaal. Prior to his departure, he secretly married Vera Sawyer, on 21st January 1926; the marriage was later annulled.[11]

In July 1926, Bosman returned from the Marico for the midyear school holidays. He stayed with his mother, not with his wife, and had to share a bedroom with his stepbrother.

-al of Bosman's biographers[12] allege that he ...ppy in the Marico and did not want to return to his job. However, he did not seem to be all that happy at home either. While in the Marico he had bought a hunting rifle, which he brought to Johannesburg with him. As his departure date drew closer, Bosman apparently began behaving strangely - although none of the biographers elaborates on this. One insinuation is that he threatened to kill himself with the rifle. The night prior to his departure, Bosman visited his wife at her mother's home, and returned to the Bellevue house at midnight. There was a full moon shining in the bedroom[13] which he shared with David who had demanded that the Bosman brothers refrain from waking him up whenever they came into the room. On this particular night, Pierre had come into the room and disturbed David's sleep. Russell got out of bed and started fighting with Pierre. Herman Bosman, who had just come home, presumably distraught about his impending return to the Marico, saw the fight, grabbed his rifle and fired a shot at David.

Immediately he realised what he had done, Herman tried to shoot himself - he felt that he was unable to cope with the consequences of his action. He begged Pierre and their stepfather William Russell to shoot him or cut his throat. He fainted and was arrested shortly thereafter. The ensuing murder trial lasted five days, and Justice Gey van Pittius sentenced Herman Bosman, aged twenty-one, to death on 15 November 1926.[14] He was confined to the death cells at Pretoria Central Prison, the "condemned cells" he describes with such horror and humour in Cold Stone Jug, while awaiting his fate.

After twenty years of freedom, the memory of the experience inside was still vivid and painful. The pain that Bosman felt was a pain that for most of his life he kept private, separating his prison experience from his

daily life. Yet he was haunted by the memory of life in Pretoria Central Prison, fictionalised as Swartklei Great Prison in Cold Stone Jug.15

Unlike Christoffel Leesing, Bosman was loth to talk about his imprisonment. Although already a writer (he had been writing short stories and poetry since his school days), Bosman at first made no known attempt at writing about his imprisonment. Interestingly one of his favourite writers was Oscar Wilde16 (generally, biographers and critics have cited Edgar Allan Poe and Baudelaire as Bosman's literary heroes, never Wilde) and he apparently had a healthy respect for "The Ballad of Reading Gaol". Yet for years he made no effort to do something similar with his own experience.

Bernard Sachs claims that after his release Bosman maintained contact with many of the people he had known in prison - including Jean Blignaut.17 He writes of Bosman's friends that

> The visitors were largely made up of old lags who had been released from prison and found some kind of haven there
> (Herman Charles Bosman as I Knew Him, page 43)

Sachs describes some of these people, at least two of whom are clearly identifiable as characters in Cold Stone Jug.18 Sach's recollections differ from the more widely expounded view that Bosman remained silent about his imprisonment and was in fact extremely ashamed of it.

When he was released in 1930, Bosman changed his name to Herman Malan (Malan was his mother's maiden name) and lived with one of his uncles, hiding himself from public view19. Although he did not speak or write of his experience in prison, Bosman remained interested in the developments of the prison system and wrote articles against the death penalty.20 One of the reasons for this pseudonym was to keep his literary achievements separate from his notoriety.

There is a mystery as to why Bosman avoided writing of his experiences until 1949. His familiarity with others who had written of their prison experiences[21] indicates that he might have considered writing of his imprisonment but chose not to do so. There are several speculations regarding the delay in his writing of the experience.

Lionel Abrahams, for example, points out that Bosman is best known for his Marico stories, although he lived only six months in the Marico:

> The bushveld experience was to feed into at least four volumes of Bosman's writings. The far longer prison term would produce very little more than one volume, the "unimpassioned chronicle" Cold Stone Jug, to be published nearly twenty years after his release. It was also written a long time after the events (...) it brings oblique testimony of all the horror such an experience must have contained for a young man of Bosman's temperament.
> (Abrahams, 1981, page 7)

It would seem that Bosman did not write of his prison experiences because he was unsure of how to structure them in writing. He was generally a humorist, and perhaps felt it inappropriate to write about his imprisonment in such a tone. However, Valerie Rosenberg claims that when Bosman began to suffer badly from claustrophobia, and had nightmares about imprisonment, his third wife, Helena,

> suggested that as a therapeutic catharsis he write an autobiographical novel chronicling his experiences in prison
> (Sunflower to the Sun, page 191)

This was approximately 1947 - when Lessing's Ek Ellendige Mens was first published and his "Twintig jare in die tronk" was serialised in Brandwag. It was seventeen years since Bosman had left prison. Bosman was at that stage also a regular contributor to Brandwag.[22] Helena Bosman was obviously familiar with the journal, and perhaps her encouragement of her husband's autobiographical novel was prompted by Lessing's writing. Perhaps

the idea for Cold Stone Jug was not Helena's, but Bosman's own, while the encouragement was hers.

Whatever the case, it is possible that Cold Stone Jug was written - apart from its personal significance to its author - as a response to Lessing. Many of the themes or aspects of his imprisonment that Bosman discusses are linked to comments made by Lessing in his books.[23] Bosman was too clever a writer, and too much of a prankster to allow Lessing's seriously written books to go unanswered. (Both writers, it should be noticed, published with AFB.)

Perhaps it was in response to Lessing's style and tone that Bosman finally found the form he needed to craft his prison experiences into a book: he took Lessing's autobiographical mode and hijacked it so that incarceration became a holiday camp for delinquents, rather than a traumatic and terrifying experience. Cold Stone Jug is remembered far more for its humour than its horror; indeed, it has been described as "pre-eminently humorous, largely a raconteur's holiday". (Abrahams, 1981, page 14.)

Bosman was always a skilful storyteller - especially when telling funny tales. In Cold Stone Jug he puts his sense of humour to use for at least two reasons, possibly more. Firstly, much of the humour and the fun was in attacking a writer as serious as Lessing and secondly, the humorous standpoint allowed Bosman to distance himself from his experience and comment on it as if he were an observer rather than an insider. While Bosman was ashamed of his imprisonment and avoided talking about it, it seems as though the easiest way for him to deal with his shame was to laugh at it.

It is unclear whether Bosman imposed the stigma on himself (hence the change of name to Herman Malan and the early recluse-like existence[24]) or whether he did in fact receive prejudicial treatment from the society in

which he lived. In one of the concluding passages of Cold Stone Jug, one of its more serious pieces, Bosman describes the new suit he was having made as a release privilege. It was a "beautiful job" (page 212).

> And there would be no numbers on the jacket or trousers. *I did not know that*, in actual reality, I would never again in my life wear a suit that did not have numbers on it. I did not know then how a man who has once been in prison feels for the rest of his life when he is outside. For I left prison twenty years ago. And I have been conscious for every moment of the time, since then, that I am an ex-convict. Every suit I wear has got prison numbers plastered on it. If the world can't see those numbers, I can (...) It was only when I got into the outside world that I discovered that I would always have numbers on my jacket and a broad arrow on the seat of my pants.
> (Cold Stone Jug, page 213)

One can speculate that much of the stigma is personally felt and not publicly imposed. This is clear in the sentence, "If the world can't see those numbers, I can".

Although he had resumed his own name by the time Cold Stone Jug was published,[25] Bosman still made every effort to keep his literary life separate from his personal one; he rarely spoke about his crime or its punishment. The book was written as a cathartic experience, and once the catharsis had been achieved, he was no longer willing to be consciously identified with the book![26]

The humour employed in the book is directed not only at the reader, the prison and the convicts, but is often directed at Bosman himself. As quoted earlier, Bosman said of writing about prison

> ... these are things that nobody should pen. For one thing, you can't. You only make a fool of yourself if you try.
> (Ibid, page 68)

He implies immediately that he is a fool - and that Chris Lessing (or anyone else who writes about prison) is a fool; having assumed this persona (that of a fool) he is able to chronicle his experiences *largely by playing* the fool.[27]

Unlike Lessing's work which is an autobiography, Bosman's is autobiographical. By drawing on his own experiences, Bosman developed a framework for writing about the prison, but it was by drawing on someone else's experiences, and his own imagination, that he was able to construct an autobiographical novel. Some of the incidents he wrote about were drawn from other people's tales of imprisonment, such as Lessing's; for example, Bosman writes at length about the way prisoners started studying and writing their autobiographies; Bosman left the Pretoria Prison in 1930, three years before Lessing arrived there; Lessing was one of the first prisoners to request and be granted permission to study in jail. The hilarious passages referring to this in Cold Stone Jug (pages 160 - 167) are undeniably a response to the seriousness with which Lessing undertook his studies.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Lessing felt that he was different from the other prisoners. He did not believe that he was a criminal at heart or that he was at all like them. He nonetheless accepted his punishment and did not pretend to be guiltless. Lessing devotes many passages to his feelings of difference and of not belonging.

In Cold Stone Jug, Bosman, too, claims that he was different from the other convicts. For example, he writes that he was the only guilty convict in the first offenders' section. In reality he was different - he had a university education. He doesn't put it quite like that though: he says instead, when describing his revulsion of some of the prison practices

> All right, it was priggish of me to have clung in that way to the outer garments of respectability, but the fact remains that I was only, after all, a first offender.
> (Ibid, page 43)

First offenders were incarcerated separately from "blue-coats", or those serving the indeterminate sentence. First offenders were, at that time, held in solitary confinement while blue-coats lived in communal cells. Lessing was an exception to this rule, for he requested a solitary cell.[28]

Erving Goffman, in Asylums, classifies the prison as a total institution:

> A total institution may be defined as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life.
> (Goffman, page 11)

Prison is clearly an example of a total institution but it differs from other such institutions, e.g. mental asylums, barracks, cloisters, because all its inmates are being punished for crimes against people, property or the state. In other total institutions, training or cure are the aims, while in the prison, the major aim is punishment. There are many who believe that the aim of the prison is also curative, in that it rehabilitates offenders, but from the evidence of recidivism (discussed below) as well as from the literary texts examined here, it can be seen that South African prisons are total institutions which serve no other role but to punish.

The total institution which has "encompassing tendencies" provides a social world for its inmates, completely free of contact with the world outside (except for strictly monitored visitors). Life, with all its mundane activities, such as sleeping, working, eating, relaxing, is conducted in one place, and is regulated by a group of authorities.

In Cold Stone Jug Bosman illustrates how Swartklei Great Prison is a total institution. He takes us into its social world by telling us stories of everyday events.

Goffman writes:

> The world view of a group functions to sustain its members and expectedly provides them with a self-justifying definition of their own situation and a prejudiced view of non-members. (Ibid, page 8)

Bosman chronicles this idea in Cold Stone Jug where the various categories of convicts - blue-coats, short-timers and first offenders - all try to justify their own situations and show resentment of members of other groups. All groups, however, are united in their hatred for other self-justifying groups, the warders, and prison staff in general, and in the fact that they are all convicts. Each prisoner, except Bosman, claims his innocence, and this in turn leads them all to belong to another self-justifying group, this time prejudiced against genuinely guilty offenders - like Bosman, the murderer.

Bosman's ironic assertion that he was the only guilty prisoner in the whole of Swartklei Great Prison allows him even more distance from his subject and enables him to comment as an outside observer.

Blue-coats are convicts who have been declared habitual criminals. They serve indeterminate sentences, ranging from six to nine years, and wear a prison uniform different from the one worn by first offenders. (Their name is derived from their blue uniforms.) Bosman, although not a blue-coat, offers a description of the blue-coat which helps to justify their grouping.

In one of the more seriously intended sections of Cold Stone Jug, Bosman discusses the 'blue-coats' at some length. He describes the pathetic cycle of the habitual criminal as follows:

> But when he is eventually discharged from prison, this man is placed on a five years' period of probation. He is not allowed to consort with fellow ex-convicts (what other friends has he got, incidentally, in the outside world that has forgotten him during those long years behind bars?) He is not allowed to frequent pubs. And if at any time during the five years of probation he gets convicted on the most minor offence, something for which he could get a five pound fine or a few days imprisonment he goes back to serve the indeterminate sentence all over again.[29]
> (op cit, page 11)

Shortly after this, Bosman writes again of the blue-coats:

> I noticed that with each year that passed, the percentage of convicts wearing blue jackets got higher. The imposition of the indeterminate sentence did not seem to act as a deterrent to recidivism. (...) in terms of prison irony the letters "I.S." have long ago been interpreted as signifying "I'm Settled".
> (Ibid, page 12)

The attention and space which Bosman gives to the blue-coats testify to their status and influence in the Swartkiel Great Prison.

> In prison the blue-coat occupies a position of some degree of importance. He doesn't rank as high as a head warder, maybe. But his social standing is certainly a considerable cut above that of a warder-recruit.[30]
> (Ibid, page 12)

Bosman relinquishes his role as fool and assumes one of a genuinely concerned citizen to comment on the increasing degree of recidivism. Michel Foucault, in Discipline and Punish, describes how the state and the prison system are responsible for this recidivism by creating a class of delinquents who have a specific role to play in assisting the police to maintain control over criminals, both in and out of prison. Prisons do not diminish the crime rate; Foucault writes:

> Detention causes recidivism; those leaving prison have more chance than before of going back to it; convicts are, in a very high proportion, former inmates.
> (Discipline and Punish, page 265)

He cites French statistics to illustrate this.

Recidivism is set in motion when former convicts are denied employment because they are seen to be untrustworthy: they are forced to resort to crime in order to survive. Some former prisoners remain under police surveillance, some have to adhere to stringent parole conditions. Many - as Bosman records - return to prison soon after their release.[31]

As well as the blue-coats, Bosman describes another of the self-justifying groups, the "dagga-rookers". In general, there was a large overlap of the two groups, and they were the two groups which held the most fascination for him. Bosman admits to having been a dagga smoker, but claims that this was a rare activity on his part, for in prison, he claims, dagga was a scarce commodity. The number of references he makes to it throughout the book indicates the irony with which he describes this scarcity.

Among the "rookers" and the blue-coats, Bosman discovered a world of fantasy and remarkable storytelling. He applies his own skilful narrative technique in reproducing some of the stories he heard in prison.[32] The way Bosman presents the stories alerts us to his own untrustworthiness as a storyteller. He does this in at least two ways. Firstly, he admits to being a dagga-rooker after making statements about the untrustworthiness of such people, and secondly his constant irony in talking about himself and the other prisoners is a deliberate pointer to the unreliability he wishes his narrator to assume.

Although Cold Stone Jug is presented as a "truthful" chronicle, Bosman alerts the reader all the time to the fact that he cannot reproduce what actually happened in

the prison - he says, for example, that the prison songs belong in the prison, and cannot be successfully rendered outside the prison world. His sustained ironic tone leaves us questioning whether there is any truth at all in Cold Stone Jug.

Bosman spent a lot of his time with the "rookers": they told good stories, stories which helped to pass the time in the prison work place, and stories which are the raw material of Cold Stone Jug. Many of the rookers were also blue-coats, who had many a fascinating tale to tell.

> To me the first offenders' section was like a small and narrow-minded village. The bluecoats' spirit was the city.
> (op cit, page 42)

Bosman comments on the type of storytelling that takes place in the prison. This mode of storytelling is the raw material from which books written about prison are crafted. In all the books discussed in this study, there are references to the yarns, the fantasies, the dreams and the bare-faced lies which convicts tell. Bosman is a master at retelling these tales - to the extent that one wonders just how much a part of their original construction he was.

Looking at all Bosman's major works, for example the four volumes of Marico stories,[33] one gets an idea of how he relates stories through the mouths of his characters, such as the untrustworthy Oom Schalk Lourens. It is questionable whether or not he is creating a similar persona in Cold Stone Jug, or whether he is relating the tales as he heard them, and left them unfinished because that is how they were left in Swartkloof Great Prison. Ultimately it does not matter. What matters is that he has based his book on the FORMS that such tales took in "boob" (prison). As Lionel Abrahams writes the book is largely a "raconteur's holiday".

Bosman's interest in collecting stories is evidenced in his desire always to be near a blue-coat:

Touch a man like that anywhere, and a story would flow from him like blood from a wound. (...) They were merely battered receptacles of stories; tarnished and rusted containers out of which strange tales issued, like djinns out of magic bottles.
(Ibid, page 42)

Bosman tells as well that he soon acquired a bad name in prison,

because I always listened with such grave interest to what he had to say, and I always laughed at the right places, and I also, in time, began consciously, to acquire the blue-coat's mode of speech.
(Ibid, page 42)

The best yarns, then, came from the blue-coats, all of whom - in Bosman's ironic tale - were reasonably proud to be blue-coats, unlike the first offenders who were all - bar one - innocent. The innocents also had their stories to tell - generally about how they were framed, which policeman was responsible for their arrest and what sorts of fantasies they entertained about being released. From the irony with which Bosman describes the first offenders and their innocence, it is obvious that he had far more respect for and interest in the blue-coats.

Among the old offenders there was also a pretty substantial proportion that was innocent (or that had been framed) but the percentage of innocent men was not nearly so high as among the first offenders. But I felt very dismal there, all the same, as the one guilty man chucked in with a whole lot of innocent lambs, and guileless simpletons who were only trying to do somebody else a favour, and angels with large, white wings, and plaster saints ...
(Ibid, page 85)

The yarns of those raconteurs who admitted their guilt, usually the blue-coats, ranged in quality and content. There were those which told of prison history, of the idiosyncrasies of the warders and the convicts, or of the details of their crimes. The tale of Rhyssons the

platteland teacher who had been convicted for statutory rape of one of his young pupils is relayed in full. Several prisoners describe their fantasies of release. Boeman's favourite renditions, crafted with care, are those tales of "how I was caught while innocently jumping over a garden wall". These are the yarns which he seemed most to enjoy recreating ironically: the tales in which the convict was always innocent and had been so badly treated.

Boeman writes often of the tales he used to hear. He was particularly talented, as he tells us, at adopting the mode of speech of the blue-coats. He reveals that he did so consciously - because it helped him to elicit a better quality story.

The manner in which he presents the stories is clearly intended to imitate the way they were told. The yarns are lengthy and complex, and invariably end in mid air - either because the teller (who might simply be Boeman) could not think of a suitable ending, or because a bell rang or a warder called for silence. Whether Boeman actually heard any of the yarns he writes about is irrelevant - the mode in which he reproduced them was the mode in which he heard similar stories in prison.

Boeman plays up the fact that he was somewhat of a misfit in the prison. This is very possibly a reference to Lessing, who repeats this idea often in his writing. Unlike Lessing, he was not a blue-coat, but he spent as much time as possible with the habitual criminals. He was a first offender, but was nonetheless, he suggests, the only guilty one in the whole prison. All his attempts at distancing himself from the majority of convicts are aimed at preserving and cultivating the guise of observer, giving credibility to his tales.

Vivienne Mawson Dickson[34] suggests that Boeman did not engage in any "soul-searching" in Cold Stone Jug. He does not actually record his feelings about anything - the

murder, the reprieve, the fantasies or his nervous breakdown, but he rarely presents the prison experience from the point of view of the observer. *It is as if* he could not invade his own privacy. Dickson is largely correct - although the fact that Bosman wrote the book implies an element of soul searching. He chose to title it "unimpassioned" to give the book as much objectivity as possible. Stylistically, Cold Stone Jug seems unimpassioned, but it is in fact filled with passion.

Bosman's *chronicle is* not chronologically ordered - he begins with a preamble describing his initial incarceration, then he jumps to daily life in the prison, before taking us into the gallows cell, where he spent some time awaiting death or reprieve. It was only after his reprieve that he was placed among the first offenders, and spent his time with the blue-coats.

Bosman was confined to the condemned *cells in* Pretoria Central prison for only ten days, yet he writes of the experience as if it were very lengthy. The effects of the incarceration as a condemned man were obviously far-reaching. In a way, the proportional space he accords it shows how deeply it affected him. On the surface, Bosman describes this period in an unimpassioned tone, as if the experience didn't really affect him. But the fact that *he* describes it at all indicates its significance to him.

One of Bosman's aims in the writing of Cold Stone Jug seems to have been a cathartic experience to help himself deal with the memory of his imprisonment and his time as a condemned man.

The majority of books depicting prison experience in South Africa describe the physical layout of the prison in great detail. Every writer[35] who has spent any time at all in Pretoria Central Prison refers at length to the gallows which are situated there. Bosman is the only one of all these writers who was in fact sentenced to death, and so lived for some time in these gallows cells, the

condemned cells. His description of the death cell and the actual gallows thus differs vastly from the descriptions of others. It is first hand.

In Cold Stone Jug Bosman is concerned to describe his sojourn in the death cell with as much humour and detachment as possible, and as briefly and as early in the book as is appropriate. At the conclusion of his memoirs from the death cell, Bosman writes

> I don't want to waste any more time writing about the condemned cell. I want to get on with the next part of this story. In fact, I want to get out of the condemned cell as quick as possible. As quick as I got out of it that afternoon when the Governor came up and informed me that I had been reprieved.
> (Ibid, page 31)

Prior to that, however, Bosman's descriptions of being sentenced to death and living for several weeks[36] with another condemned man, Stoffels, are both chilling and unnervingly humorous. The two condemned men believed that they had nothing to lose by breaking all the rules, by shouting and laughing, by teasing the warders and playing practical jokes continuously.

Before offering a description of the condemned cell, Bosman describes murderers. Murderers seldom become blue-coats, because

> Murder being the crime it is, it is unlikely that anybody will feel like committing it a number of times. For that matter, you're not allowed to commit murder a number of times...
> (Ibid, page 14)

Unlike those with indeterminate sentences, and other offenders, murderers do not wear distinctive uniforms.

> There is no need for men to put any distinguishing marks on a murderer's clothes. Cain's mark is there for all to read. Murder is a doomed sign to wear on your brow.
> (Ibid, page 14)

With this serious introduction, Bosman takes the reader into the gallows wing of Swartklai Great Prison.

Condemned cells are adjacent to the gallows, and condemned men are confined there for any number of weeks or months - Bosman writes that it can be from five weeks to two months.

> During all this time the shadow of this hanging lies like a pall over the inmates of the prison, warders as well as convicts.
> (Ibid, page 15)

None of the prisoners likes to know that there are condemned men in the prison, but their presence permeates the entire place. For the prison

> is dominated, spiritually as well as architecturally, by the gallows chamber, whose doors rise up, massive and forbidding, at the end of the main wing in the building.
> (Ibid, page 14)

Not every prison has a gallows: Pretoria Central is known as the "Hanging Jail", for it is there that South Africa's executions take place.[37] In most of the literature written about South Africa's prisons, the songs sung in the condemned cells in Pretoria Central Prison are described. They are sad, poignant songs, sometimes religious, sometimes political, always noticeable. As the date of execution grows closer, the singing is reputed to get louder, and more intense.[38] Bosman and Stoffels did not sing, they merely laughed continuously and unsettled the other convicts.

The cells of the regular prisoners are unlocked slightly late on the morning of an execution. Bosman claims that on the morning of a hanging, everything in normal prison routine is delayed by half an hour, or as long as it takes to complete the execution.

> The men in the condemned cell must not be allowed to know how near his hour has actually come. They say it is all done very efficiently. They say it takes less than two minutes from the moment the hangman has unlocked the door of the condemned cell until he has got the prisoner trussed and pinioned and with the rope around his neck, waiting for the trap-door to fall.
> (Ibid, page 15 - 16)

Bosman supposedly writes of the horror in the "unimpassioned" tone he claims to prefer. However, Bosman's alleged unimpassioned tone is packed with emotion, in strong contrast to his stated aim in the subtitle. One cannot forget how close Bosman was to becoming one of these *two-minute statistics*. Perhaps his feelings about his impending death had been suppressed and numbed over time so that he was able, almost 20 years later, to write about them only in an unimpassioned way. He occasionally breaks through the distance he has created, to admit

> I dislike according so much space to the details of the hangings, but these things loom like a shadow over the prison all the time, like an unpleasant odour, and they make life inside the prison a lot gloomier than it would otherwise be.
> (Ibid, page 16)

Bosman was not alone in the condemned cells. He was separated from his companion, Stoffels,

> by two rows of bars and wire netting, which formed a little passage in which the warder on duty paced up and down.
> (Ibid, page 16)

Bosman's memories of the death cell are "only the external impressions, the surface things, which I have learnt are not realities at all." (Ibid, page 17.)

The carefully chosen "external impressions" are Bosman's way of indicating that he is being ironic.

The death cell had a different meaning when "after Stoffels had been hanged (I realized) how much I missed him, and how little I knew about him, really." (Ibid, page 29)

Stoffels, or the person on whom he is really modelled, was probably the most important companion Bosman had in all the years at Swartkloof Great Prison. Although he was simply a briefly felt other presence, about whom "I was never able to feel (...) that he was a man in the

world of men" (Ibid, page 29), they shared an experience which very few people share and live to remember. Both had killed and were waiting for their own lives to end. Neither was feeling "too good" about this. (Ibid, page 8.)

After Stoffels was hanged, "it wasn't the same anymore when I was left alone in the condemned cell." (Ibid, page 29.)

Perhaps it was the fear and the memory of being alone and vulnerable which led Bosman to befriend the gregarious blue-coats after his reprieve. He was, as a first offender, in a solitary cell, and did not want to work in an isolated indoor job. The blue-coats provided him with a special sense of reality; their lives of fantasy sustained him.

Part of the "fun" of being in the condemned cell was teasing the Warders, trapping them into compromising situations and knowing that they could not mete out any significant punishment in the light of the death sentence. Condemned men were kept under twenty-four hour surveillance and could engage in conversation with their guards. The guards were as much prisoners as their wards, as they were locked in with them at night. If the guard did not do his job correctly, for example if he neglected to notice that a prisoner was inflicting injuries on himself, the guard could be held responsible for the incident. Even if the warder on duty was not himself being watched over all the time, he was by implication under surveillance.

Surveillance in total institutions is crucial to their smooth functioning. This is pointed out by both Goffman and Foucault, and is implied in Bosman's chronicle. Institutions such as the prison have spatial *divisions* constructed in such a way that occupants are at all times visible to an authority, whether they are aware of this or not. At other times they are made aware of the surveillance - they are subject to inspections of their

calls and of their cells, and they can see the agents of surveillance, the prison warders. During working hours, convicts are watched over by "span-warders" - although Bosman is careful to illustrate their frequent inefficiency.

While Bosman was in prison The Sjambok, a weekly journal based in Johannesburg, published the prison memoirs of a newly released prisoner, Lago Clifford. Some Bosman scholars (e.g. Stephen Gray and Valerie Rosenberg) have suggested that these pieces were written by Bosman and smuggled out of Pretoria Central when Clifford was released. The reason for the speculation is the astute and accurate descriptions of the gallows and the hanging procedure. Bosman, as a condemned man, might have been more aware of the hanging procedure than regular convicts, but then again, he might not. Even if both descriptions are Bosman's (i.e. the ones in Cold Stone Jug and The Sjambok), they are worthy of comparison.
Lago Clifford claims to have met and befriended

> a young student - refined, creative, poetical. He is serving a sentence of ten years hard labour, having been convicted of murder but reprieved ... The poor young student I speak of is an Afrikander and educated wholly in South Africa. But he has no trace whatever of any colonial accent. His aspect is a bright and cheerful one; he has clear blue vital eyes. He was convicted of having shot and killed in an ungovernable fit of rage and jealousy.
> (Sjambok, 5th July 1929)

Clifford praises the blue-eyed poet's intellect and talents, and verifies much of what is revealed about prison conditions in Cold Stone Jug. When Clifford arrived at Pretoria Central, Bosman was working as assistant librarian,

> but after some months of this indoor work he asked for a change of labour, asked to be allowed to break stones! But the stones (as he said) were "under God's clear sky!" Now he is in the Carpenter's shop.
> (Ibid)

Bosman relates in Cold Stone Jug how he moved from various "shops" to dispel boredom. He claims to have been in the printers' shop for about a year, when

> the head warder (...) ended up by assessing my intelligence as a good deal lower than that of the average convict (...) One morning, I was informed that I had been given a change of labour. "What span, sir?" I asked the head warder who imparted this information to me. "Ye're on the stone-pile," the head-warder announced, contempt in his voice, and turned on his heel. The news came as a bit of a shock to me.
> (op cit, page 70)

If, as Clifford suggests, Bosman asked for this transfer, it is in keeping with his wish to be near the most interesting prisoners - the storytelling, dagga smoking blue-coats.

Clifford describes how he felt about the gallows and their operation after meeting Bosman and other reprieved murderers. In Bosman's description, when there is an execution, prison routine changes slightly, so that no-one is released from his cell until after the body has been removed to the mortuary.

> Executions take place at 7 am. During my term nine men were hanged. I saw one of these condemned men being brought out to exercise a day before his death. He was accompanied by two native warders, and he just walked up and down the yard for half an hour daily. On the morning of an execution nobody is let out at the usual time of 7 am. All are locked in. It is uncanny the silence in that vast place and from where we are we can hear the fall of the trap quite distinctly.
> (Outlook, 12th July 1929)

Clifford's piece continues with a clinical description of how the gallows operate and how the condemned man meets his death.

The speculation that Clifford's gallows descriptions were in fact Bosman's must remain speculation. It is

however unlikely that the descriptions were Bosman's. Clifford's descriptions are a rationalist and macabre. This was not Bosman's way.

Clifford's detailed and nightmarish description of the gallows was accompanied by sketches, to illustrate the horror more forcefully. It would seem that Clifford could do this because he was not condemned to die by hanging while Bosman was; he did not need ironic distance.

It is in his descriptions of the gallows (and the condemned cells) and of his later nervous breakdown that Bosman writes most seriously, although he retains his ironic tone throughout. The majority of the book is far more humorous, and is more easily comparable with the experiences of Christoffel Lessing.

Unlike the majority of prison texts written in South Africa, Bosman's book (like Lessing's) is not specifically located in a particular political context.

The book in fact has very little to locate it in a particular context of time. (Several Bosman critics and reviewers have drawn attention to his notion that art is independent of context.)[39] He had no conscious desire to be an historian or a sociologist, despite his having titled Cold Stone Jug a "chronicle", which is a term usually reserved for socio-historical documentation. Despite Bosman's view of himself in the guise of an artist creating simply for the sake of "art", Cold Stone Jug serves as a sociological document of prison life in South Africa. It invites comparisons with the issues it omits. Bosman is generally regarded as a distinctly South African writer, and Cold Stone Jug is a chronicle of a whites only, men only, common-law prison in South Africa of the 1920s. The South African-ness of the book is depicted in the use of purely South African slang. "Boob" is a word for prison, "rookers" are smokers, and Bosman says of this that

> ... all this was going on here, in South Africa, and I had lived to the age of twenty years, and I had never known that there really was a world such as this, here in our midst, with its own criminal parlance, and its own terribly different, terribly mysterious way of life.
> (Ibid, page 34)

He mentions as well that "Boob, and not jug, [is] the Sparkling prison word for a prison." (Ibid, page 34.) Yet Bosman chose to title his book Cold Stone Jug; this is yet a further indication that his persona is untrustworthy.

Bosman's book is exceedingly significant in a study of literature about South African prisons - for it serves as a base for all that follows it.[40] He exposes for the reader a complete world, so very different from the world outside, yet which functions essentially according to the norms subscribed to outside. The prison world which Bosman presents is harsh and brutal: it is made of cold stone. He allows the reader to glimpse slightly how he succeeds in integrating the prison experience into his life when he writes, in the Epilogue,

> This is really a love story - a story of adolescent love, my first love ... Her eyes were fringed with dark lashes, like barred windows. Her bosom was hard and pure and cold - like a cement floor. And it was a faithful and chaste love. During all those years of my young manhood, in whose arms did I sleep each night, but in hers?
> (Ibid, page 220)

One of the easiest ways for Bosman to deal with his four-year absence from society was thus to think that he had been with a lover. It is a poignant, moving description of how he dealt with a womanless world.

Homosexuality in total institutions is common. In boarding schools, cloisters, barracks, it is hidden and despised. In prisons, it has various connotations. To be a victim of homosexuality implies weakness and subservience, and symbolises "womanishness". Often prison homosexuality begins with a rape, which serves to

emphasise that there are some men in the prison who regard themselves as better and more powerful than others. They use bribery and offers of protection from other prisoners as a means to sodomy.

Blue-coat Pym, a fairly prominently drawn character in Cold Stone Jug, made no secret of his homosexual desire for Bosman. Bosman admits frankly that he abhorred homosexuality and that its existence unnerved him. He did not know how to deal with Pym's attentions. He tried to fantasise that the attention was coming from a woman in the women's prison. The women prisoners did all the laundry for the male convicts and one day Bosman found a long dark hair on his clothing. He dreamed that the attention was coming from its owner.

Despite the frequency of homosexuality "a lot of the talk in prison is about women. Naturally." (Cold Stone Jug, page 78.)

Contact with women is limited to occasional visits. All prison facilities are totally segregated. Even visits do not provide prisoners with a sense that they are mixing, for these are not private and not often. Men in prisons miss the company of woman and children, and they miss the security of stable relationships. When they try to form relationships with other men, these are often viewed as homosexual. It is as if honest friendship is not possible in the prison.

This is borne out as well by the way in which the blue-coats - or any of the yarn spinners - are shown as distrusting of everyone in their immediate circle. They speak of their former accomplices with contempt. Some, like blue-coat Tex Fraser, try to use the bond built up by the storytelling to make a sexual advance.

> Tex Fraser could see that I was touched by the narrative, (...) at the same time that he was keeping his hammer going up and down, grasping it in his right hand, his left hand was beginning to feel along the back of my legs, for I was sitting close to Tex Fraser.
> (Ibid, page 102)

Bosman relates how he suffered great anguish as a result of Pym's advances. Pym made a habit of observing Bosman, as he had fallen in love with him. It is with some relief that Bosman writes:

> Pym never made any homosexual proposals to me, except once, when he was very much under the influence of dagga. And I showed my revulsion so strongly that he never mentioned the subject again. But in his whole attitude he revealed his feelings for me. (...) He was simply infatuated with me, physically: it was a dreadful and unnatural infatuation. And I was frightened of it.
> (Ibid, page 159)

Pym, as a prisoner in the penal section[41] of the prison, began his "seduction" of Bosman by asking him to share his pew during church services. He used to send him extra groceries and sweets bought from his gratuity. Later, when Pym was released from the penal section, he pursued Bosman more actively, and even came to see him in the first offenders' section on weekends. All these gestures were most disconcerting for Bosman, who was craving female company and was trying to be a well-behaved first offender preparing for an early release. Pym's attentions - which he writes about with a distinct lack of irony - were among the factors contributing to Bosman's subsequent nervous breakdown, which he later describes as a descent into insanity.

As suggested earlier, prisons, like most total institutions, employ a constant surveillance of inmates by personnel. This surveillance takes the forms of warders on patrol, warders observing the convicts at work and at rest, and most intrusive, the body search.

Body-searches are very common in prisons. Harold Strachan, a political prisoner who was incarcerated among common-law convicts in the early 1960s describes such a search in more detail.

As for searching, prisoners were stripped stark naked by warders in the middle of a corridor with other men walking around. Even I, who was considered a respectable sort of prisoner, whenever I came in or out of the section for a visit or anything, I had to strip stark naked and stand around in the cold (...) Searching was most undignified. The man puts his hand anywhere on your body. At times I was made to "pause".[42]
(Rand Daily Mail, 1965)

Bosman explains the need for the search because many convicts "bottle in"[43] illicit articles such as dagga, newspapers, writing paper, candles, and tobacco.

> The ordinary search is quite simple. It takes place twice a day (...) You simply go up to a warder (You can pick the warder you want to search you, provided that you are not too obvious about making the choice) and you stand to attention a pace away from him with your arms dangling laterally extended, holding your red spotted handkerchief dangling from one hand and your hat in the other. The warder passes his hand over your clothes, up and down, and the job is done.
> (op cit, page 60)

He adds

> You are searched regularly every time you come in from the shops into the section. You aren't searched coming out - because what the hell is there for you to bring out of the prison-cage anyway?
> (Ibid, page 60)

When a strip search is ordered, the procedure is different. Jackets and pants are removed and the searcher "feels all over you" before thoroughly searching the clothing.

The most commonly hidden article was the tinder box[44] specially manufactured for easy hiding; small enough to fasten high up between the legs.

> The warder was not supposed to feel there. He was supposed to respect your private parts. He could only search you between your legs in the presence of a superior officer and at a formal strip search.
> (Ibid, page 63)

Many objects and useful commodities were thus smuggled into the section between the legs and in the rectums of daring convicts.

Some warders would violate the accepted code of search conduct, and would feel high up the thighs.

> The only convicts who went to stand in front of these warders for searching were convicts who carried nothing fastened between their legs; or else they were pansies, and liked having a warder pass his hands all over their bodies. (Ibid, page 63)

Searching of bodies is routine for both convicts and prison personnel; the personnel are constantly on the lookout for dagga. Rosman relates with great amusement two incidents which took place on the same day:

> One day a convict sawed up his hand. Two fingers were severed completely. (...) The warder ordered a couple of the convicts to pick him up and carry him through the mortuary gate. I have explained that the rules lay it down that every convict passing through from the workshops into the section has got to be searched. (Ibid, page 93)

This includes sick men carried through on stretchers. Billy the Bastard, the warder on duty, insisted on carrying out his search on the unconscious man; he claimed that for all he knew the man might be smuggling dagga into the hospital.

Rosman takes macabre delight in relating what happened next. Later the same day, Slangvel, a notoriously dirty, smelly, dagga-smoking convict, slipped into a concrete gutter and injured his head. He too was carried unconscious through the mortuary gate to the hospital.

> For the second time that day Billy the Bastard was confronted with an unconscious convict, with blood running from him being carried through the mortuary gate. And this time Billy the Bastard's luck was dead in. He said he had to search the convicts for dagga ... He found enough dagga on Slangvel to render a whole city unconscious. (Ibid, page 96)

The search is only one aspect of the constant surveillance in the prison. Cells are constructed in such a way that the warders on duty can peer in to see what a convict is doing. Lessing described this in his fear that he would be caught writing. Each morning when cells are opened, heads are counted. Each convict has a "ticket" on which is recorded his name, number, cell number, sentence and record of behaviour. At any time, a warder can demand to see a man's ticket.

Warders are always shouting commands to ensure strict discipline. Bosman suggests that this is done more from habit than necessity. Each convict is allocated his specific place in lines, "spans" and cells. This ensures that surveillance and access to prisoners are always possible.

While the warders are always able to monitor the movements of a convict, they cannot always be seen to be doing so. Cell doors have spy-holes through which the warders watch. At work, the convicts see each other, but once they are locked up, especially the first offenders, they are entirely alone, to be seen from disguised vantage points.

Nonetheless, the convicts in Bosman's chronicle do see each other, and have varied contact and several types of interaction. They know each other by name, they are aware of length of sentence and of crime, and like the warders, they observe each other closely. Bosman implies indirectly that they observe each other in order to tease.

The greatest obsession of all prison inmates in Cold Stone Jug is the passing of time, or rather the tardiness of its passage. Time is at once the most significant and insignificant of all things that happen in prison - for it can be seen merely as a marker for nothingness.

At the same time it means everything to prisoners. It is time that keeps them away from the ordinary world.

Time and its calculation fill the minds of all prisoners always, no matter what they are doing. Every prisoner is sentenced to a certain number of years which are divided into months, weeks, days and hours. Every minute of the time is accounted for.

Bosman served three years and nine months of his ten year sentence. In Cold Stone Jug he does not reveal how much time he spent in prison, but in the title he refers to it as "a somewhat lengthy sojourn". He refers to time constantly, from the beginning of the novel until his release.

In some passages he reflects on time; in others he simply mentions that it is passing very slowly. One incident in particular illustrates the peculiarity of the concept of time in prison.

When Bosman was working in the printers' shop, he discovered that the convicts were often too lazy to re-sort the type; they dumped it instead under a loose floorboard. One day their laziness was discovered. Convict Botha was given the task of sorting and packing the type into the correct fonts and sizes.

> "How long do you reckon the job will take you?" I asked of Botha one day. "About seven years," he replied. His answer frightened me a little. I thought of a man outside. What doesn't happen to a man outside prison in the course of seven years? The good years and the bad years. The adventures that come his way. The triumphs and the heartbreaks that are bound up with seven years of living. (...) And during this time Botha the convict would be sorting the type out of the box. Only after seven years would his fingers close around the last pica space. And nothing would be happening to Botha during those years. Just nothing at all.
> (Ibid, page 127)

Yet out of all this "nothing" of filling time, Bosman has produced an entire novel. Anecdotes, events and nothingness filled three and three-quarter years for him in Swartkloi Great Prison.

Physical time is marked off by church services, visits, inspections, completion of tasks and of sentences. But for some, time is indeterminate - blue-coats have no idea when they will be released. This was how Christoffel Lessing lived. Botha spoke casually of seven years; this is the average length of time served by a blue-coat.

Bosman relates that in the gallows cells, time has less meaning than anywhere else in the prison.

Time for the condemned person is irrelevant, even though it marks the possible end of life for the murderer; night and day are indistinguishable until two days before the end - when the condemned man knows exactly how much (or how little) time he has left. Bosman describes the time in the condemned cell with great mirth.

Bosman describes as well a typical day in prison. Days are divided into short time segments, culminating in lock-up. In between are meals, inspections, searches, labour, visits, church services - all indicated by a bell which has

> a raucous clangour that reverberates throughout the wings and corridors of the prison, as though to set a tone of nerve-wracked ill-humour for the rest of the day.
> (Ibid, page 53)

Sometimes, in between the rigid prison routine, there is time to read or write letters, speak to the librarian or a superior officer if there is a complaint - but always, one is bored and frustrated. To fill the boredom, convicts tell the stories which Bosman takes such delight in re-telling, and sing the songs which he says could have been composed only in a prison.

As with the sorting of the type mentioned above, all tasks in prison take a long time, so long that it seems odd to look to their completion. For example, Bosman writes of his time in the stoneyard

> It took us a couple of years to build the wall and the workshops. A couple of years is all right, if you say it fast. But in prison it seems a long time. Even a short stretch seems to take a long time to do.
> (Ibid, page 126)

One of the more "productive" ways of dealing with incarceration, as discussed in the previous chapter, is to study; another is to write.

Lessing claims to have been the first common-law convict to have obtained his matric in prison. Bosman, who left prison approximately three years before Lessing arrived at Pretoria Central, writes at length of the scholarly prisoners. If Lessing's claim is true, then Bosman is fictionalising.

At this juncture it becomes clearly evident that in Cold Stone Jug Bosman is responding to Lessing's life story and his published accounts thereof. He is poking fun at Lessing. The most entertaining set of anecdotes and opinions in Cold Stone Jug are those about the "wave of culture-consciousness that swept over the prison."

This "culture-consciousness" took two forms: post-matriculation study and autobiography-writing.

Bosman claims to have had little patience and no interest in what his fellow inmates were doing. He writes

> But behind this urge on the part of the convicts to express themselves in prose autobiographies there were a number of other factors that I need not go into now. Suffice it to say that this ebullition of graphomania was only one manifestation of that yearning for culture and scholarship that, for a somewhat extensive period, infected the prison like a medieval plague.
> (Ibid, page 161)

Bosman was himself one of a very small number of educated men in the prison. He had a university degree and was a trained teacher. Iago Clifford[3] mentioned how refined Bosman was, and Bosman himself hints at his difference from the general run of prisoners on the basis

of his education. He mentions as well that some of the other prisoners were professional men, such as Heymans the Flatteland teacher and Jimmy Gair, a former civil engineer.

Bosman's contempt for these men who studied year after year is based on his opinion that a degree acquired in prison had no value (page 167). It is an opinion that echoes that of the authorities who were reluctant to allow Lessing to study.

Lessing writes proudly and frankly of his battle to study for his matric certificate and later, his Bachelor of Arts degree. Bosman, in Cold Stone Jug mocks (and feels pity for) those convicts who were trying to educate themselves. His most pointed "attack" on someone like Lessing is contained in the following remark:

> Only an illiterate man would spend his time in prison in study, and for that reason he would always remain illiterate, no matter how far he persisted with his studies. And he would also of necessity be a very stupid sort of man. A man with no originality and no sense of humour.
> (Ibid, page 167)

Lessing's autobiography certainly lacks humour - but he did not think, as Bosman claims in Cold Stone Jug[46] that prison was a humorous place. It lacks originality in the sense that Lessing drew on the limited literary heritage he had been exposed to in prison for his stylistic and thematic models. However, it reveals an enormous degree of originality and courage.

Bosman's own book is endowed with a different sort of originality - he is the only one of all the South African prison writers who presents his experience with a consistent degree of humour and irony. (There are occasional humorous interludes in other prison writing - but these are usually secondary to the major themes of deprivation and hardship.)

Bosman's scathing sarcasm about the "wave of culture-consciousness" is encapsulated in a lengthy anecdote about convicts' learning the difference between a quagga and a zebra.

> It was regarded as a mark of educational attainment to be able to recite straight out, word perfect, just as it was in the dictionary, the definition of, respectively, a zebra and a quagga. (...) There were several dictionaries in the prison (...) [a]nd it was noticed, after a while, that in each of these dictionaries there was a piece cut out on the page having a lot of words beginning with Q, and also a piece removed from a page where the words began with Z.
> (Ibid, page 162)

The prisoners in the tale learnt the definitions by rote and accused those who did not know it by heart of ignorance.

When challenged as to the relevance of what they were studying, 'convicts replied "that's eddication (...) Ain't you ne-er heard of eddication?" (Ibid, page 165.)

He sums up his opinion of those like Lessing, who studied and succeeded academically:

> These convicts who wanted a University education. When all the time they were in the finest University that there is.(...) I couldn't help thinking along these lines: a convict with eight previous convictions - how much more knowledge has he got in life than a University professor, passing his whole existence in the chalk-dust of the school-room and the lecture theatre?"
> (Ibid, page 166)

The extreme hilarity with which Bosman presents these anecdotes reveals his skilful superiority as a writer - especially since no-one was in fact studying while he was in prison. Bosman himself made no known attempt at studying further while in prison.

Although critical (in this section of his chronicle) of those prisoners who wrote in prison, Lago Clifford included in one of his Sjambok articles a poem which he

attributes to Bosman (although he did not name him).[48] The poem is titled "Perhaps Some Day", and reveals the suffering of his imprisonment as well as his optimism about his future.

"Perhaps Some Day"

Some day, perhaps, I'll see the world again.
May be some day.
When all those things of grinding grief and pain
Have passed away.

For there's a longing in my heart to be
Beneath wide skies,
And all the painted flowers of Spring I'll see
With changed eyes.

When drowsy streamlets flow and blackbirds sing
In willow trees.
A soft wind stirs; nor thoughts awakening,
Nor memories.

The blossoms fading like the broke.. years
All gone and past;
No yesterday's recall of hopeless tears,
But rest at last.

May be some bygone wrong, age darkened will
Be lingering yet;
But if or no the world remembering still
I shall forget.

Though my heart is bruised and riven,
Though my soul is scathed with scars,
Yet I've touched the fringe of heaven,
Yet I've lived among the stars.
(Sjambok, 5th July 1929)

Bosman does not reveal in Cold Stone Jug that he wrote poetry in prison; he scorns those who "wrote" inside. He introduces the subject with a preamble about convicts who

> started writing their autobiographies. And what a lot of lies they wrote, too: many of them brought their manuscripts for me to read.
> (op cit, page 160)

Bosman has taken the "lies" which the other prisoners brought to him and has transformed them into a narrative

of life in prison. He tells that he knew the stories were lies because of their glorious content: "they mentioned nothing of the squalor of their lives outside the prison." (Ibid, page 160.)

Bosman summarises the content of the alleged prison autobiographies and, by telling us some of the manuscript titles, reveals his amusement at the procedure.

> And they would have some snappy titles for the junk they wrote, too. Titles like "Twelve Times Innocently Convicted", or "My Days with the Corner House Millionaires" - "days" be it observed, and not, like now, "years" - or "Ruined Through Being Too Kind-Hearted". There were lots of titles like that. But there was also a grim realism about the titles of some of these works of autobiography's like "Put in Boob by a Mark"; or "Twenty Years in Jug for Bugger-All",[39] or "I Don't Care How, Much", or "Why I Done Time", or "Cold Storage Jug".
> (Ibid, page 161)

Including his title among those that are so obviously the works of lying con-men does not lend much credibility to Bosman's chronicle. As the book proceeds, so it deviates further and further from "truth".

Although this is a relatively unsubstantiated claim, it seems likely that in part of his book Bosman attacks Lessing for studying and writing, and is indirectly accusing him of lying. He seems to be responding to Lessing's "self-righteousness" in To What Red Hell - where his confessions of guilt are nonetheless accompanied by extensive justification and explanation - such as revealed in titles like "Ruined Through Being Too Kind-Hearted" or "Twenty Years in Jail for Bugger-All".

Underlying Bosman's entire set of anecdotes about people who wrote in prison, and indeed his whole novel, is his comment that

> these are things that nobody should pen. For one thing, you can't. You only make a fool of yourself if you try.
> (Ibid, page 68)

Herman Charles Bosman - convict, writer, fool.

One of the major themes common to much writing about prison - as has been pointed out - is that of insanity. Lessing described his anorexia nervosa and his extreme neurotic anxiety. (Ruth First attempted suicide as a result of severe depression, D M Zwelonke's major fictional plot-device depends on degeneration into madness.)

In Cold Stone Jug, Bosman discusses madness at length - both because it was commonly feared in Swartkloi Great Prison and because he suffered a nervous breakdown (or near nervous breakdown) while in prison.

Prior to his own madness, Bosman realised that many convicts are mad, but they keep this to themselves, because they do not want to be punished further for being mad, or to inflict punishment on other convicts by being mad in front of them. Such men had hallucinations:

> the sight of the quiet madman in the place would make the sane convicts shudder; for every man in that prison had the fear, hidden away in the back of his mind, that some day, without his being able to do anything about it, his own reason would go, also.
> (Ibid, page 177)

Prison lore, according to Bosman, suggests that when a convict starts talking about his impending release when this is hardly likely, he is going insane.

Bosman reveals that he had a feeling that he was to be released early on a special discharge; this convinced him that he was losing touch with reality. Among the factors that contributed to Bosman's nervous breakdown were his traumatic relationship with Pym, his brief adventure beyond the prison walls on a prison job,[50] and his difference from the other prisoners. Unconscious, or rather, unstated in the novel, was the terrifying knowledge that he had killed someone.

One night, an exceedingly eerie thing happened which simultaneously convinced Bosman both that he had finally gone mad and that he was perfectly sane.

On this particular night, several convicts began howling like dogs, wolves or hyenas. They stood on their stools, put their mouths as close as possible to the bars on the windows, and howled.

> I knew I didn't join in with this general howling. I pulled the blankets over my head and lay on the concrete floor of my cage and shivered. I was very frightened, that night.
> (Ibid, page 179)

At that point, Bosman noticed the full moon. The full moon, folkloristically, has weird connotations, but for Bosman it had awful memories: the night he shot his step-brother, 17th July 1926, the full moon was shining through the bedroom window. Bosman at first thought he was insane because he was the only convict who had heard the howling, but was reconvinced of his clarity of mind when Pym eventually told him

> Don't you worry about that, Pal (...) Of course I heard them howlings. I would have been mad, all right, if I hadn't. And so would you. But you won't find any of the boys talk about it. Especially not them that howled. It don't happen very often. (...) The boys just sort of let themselves go. One bloke starts them off and then they all join in. And they dunno what they're doing. The first time I heard it, when I was a youngster, I got crap-scared. I thought as the whole boob was going mad and me also. (...) Every long-timer gets like you, after a few years: afraid he's going balmy. But you get over it ...
> (Ibid, pages 181 - 182)

In a style which by this point in the novel has become typical of Bosman, the "madness" is described with the utmost seriousness and is extremely *frightening*, while Bosman succeeds as well in making parts of it very funny. For example, while listening to Pym's explanation of the howling, he does not forget to tell us that he instructed Pym not to say "ain't".

Despite his efforts to remain sane, Bosman began to hallucinate and laugh in a "mad" way. He claims that his attempts at *retaining his hold* on reality took the form of reading psychology textbooks which helped him logically to feel neurotic rather than insane. But this may simply be a reference to Lessing and the fact that he had studied psychology in prison.

After a time, however, Bosman claims to have gone mad. One of the hallucinations he suffered was not insane, merely chillingly accurate.

> I began to conceive of an awful "life" existing in the penal section, and afterwards in every section of the prison. I imagined this "life" as a vast, fat black serpent, trailing through all the corridors of the prison, through the walls and everything; filling the whole space between walls and roof, and the entire hall, and the whole prison; and this gigantic snake was alive and breathing, and *it couldn't draw breath* properly because it was so closely confined between walls and roof; this was "die lewe" in the prison. The prison itself was a live thing, sweating and suffocating in its own immurement.
> (Ibid, page 176)

This terrifying image of incarceration underlying Bosman's humour and sarcasm reveals Cold Stone Jug ultimately to be a serious book.

Some of the other terrifying hallucinations which suffocated Bosman were those of a monstrous progeny[51] developing in the prison; he felt a suffocation and a sickness in his belly - he writes

> the ancient Greeks were right. The seat of insanity was the stomach. (...) I knew that my insanity wasn't coming out of my brain at all. Because my brain was working reasonably and logically, and I could think clearly. But that purple lunacy, that was like a handful of some slippery substance, was coming out of my stomach.
> (Ibid, page 184)

As soon as he started hallucinating, it was his stomach that was sickened. The images of a monstrous

progeny got worse and worse, until he could barely stop himself from screaming. Instead he banged at the door of his cell with the lid of his sanitary pail. Several warders came to investigate, and eventually took him to the hospital section. At this point, Bosman claims that the madness left him - possibly because he was participating in something exciting, and was no longer in need of something to alleviate his boredom.

Eventually convict Bosman was hospitalised under psychiatric observation where he vacillated between hallucinatory madness and sanity. He managed to convince the doctor of his sanity by responding "sanely" to all tests, but raised his doubts by telling him that he hoped to be released soon. (This was a sure sign of madness among long-term prisoners.) Bosman had the doctor fooled. He has the reader fooled too - we do not know whether or not Bosman was insane, or whether he ever recovered from the prison madness. Perhaps he was always perfectly sane and merely decided to play mad. Yet he tells us:

> But I had learnt one thing. And that was that I was mad, stone mad. And that all the other people in the world were mad, also. And I learnt that what I had to do was to play-act sane. And I am still doing the same thing. I am still play-acting sane: it has come easy to me, with the years. (...) I know I can lick my insanity every time. Or nearly every time.[52]
> (Ibid, page 202)

Although he was released from observation in the hospital section, Bosman still had moments of hallucination and madness. He used to crawl around his cell on hands and knees, to exhaust himself; he was continually hoping for early release. One night a warder caught him crawling on the floor. Bosman offered as an explanation that he was looking for his ticket to calculate his release date. The warder told him that he thought prisoners did not spend long enough in prison:

> "The authorities must be mad to give you time off like that." "Yes, sir," I agreed with the warder promptly. I was very glad of what he had said.
> *He had said* that the authorities were mad. That gave me more confidence than ever. I didn't feel so lonely and cut off from the rest of mankind, in my insanity. Here were the authorities also mad. I had the warder's word for it. I had a sudden, vivid picture of the authorities also crawling round and round on the floors of their bedrooms. It cheered me up no end, and that ridiculous thought of the authorities also having to be careful of the way they manipulated their buttocks round the corners ....
> (Ibid, page 205)

Bosman has restored the humour to the novel after a terrifying departure from the usual tone of the book. The humour *assists him in reasserting his* control over his mental health. Knowing that he is "mad" liberates him from having to be "sane" - he ultimately *remains* sane because he no longer feels the pressure to do so.

Bosman was not hospitalised for very *long* - but while he was in hospital, Pym too went insane. He was not as fortunate as Bosman, and, sadly, ended up in the *Criminal* Lunatic Asylum - the worst fear among sane convicts.

When Bosman was finally discharged from prison, he was still obsessed with time; he claims that his file had been lost, so he had to stay an additional few days inside.

> As a result of the confusion, I didn't get discharged from the prison, like other convicts at nine o'clock in the morning. The warrant for my release arrived late one afternoon.
> (Ibid, page 217)

This is in stark contrast to Lessing's sudden release. While *Lessing* was released into the arms of his beloved Connie, Bosman tells in his epilogue that Cold Stone Jug was a love story, written to the being in whose care he slept for three years and nine months.

Perhaps the differences in Bosman's recounting of his prison experience and Lessing's writing are attributable to the fact that Bosman wrote Cold Stone Jug so long after his release while Lessing wrote while still in prison.

The memory of Bosman's imprisonment haunted him at least until he had completed Cold Stone Jug. He wrote in a mode that hid the essential misery of prison existence behind a facade of irony, sarcasm and humour. For Bosman, this was the best means of dealing with so harsh and humiliating a situation.

Chapter Three

Ruth First was detained on the ninth of August, 1963 in the main hall of the University of the Witwatersrand library.[1] She was told that she was being arrested under the ninety day detention clause of the "no trial act".[2] She was detained alone in a cell for 117 days.

It was as a result of this detention experience that she crafted her book 117 Days,[3] one of several published accounts to have emerged from South African prisons in the 1960s.[4] These works were mostly texts emanating from the experience of solitary confinement, which distinguishes them markedly from the other texts discussed in this study.[5]

A close examination of prison literature from all over the world reveals the literature of solitary confinement to be the most common.[6] Planning and executing the writing of a diary, memoir or book, and even letters to those outside, provides solitary prisoners with stimulation and company, and can assist them in retaining their sanity.

In South African prison literature, accounts of solitary confinement under the "no-trial law" stand out as particularly terrifying and brutal. They are often extremely sad but display immense strength and courage.

The nature of solitary confinement, especially the experiences of interrogation and the fear of the unknown seem to result in a need among former detainees to share their experiences with an audience larger than just family and friends. Perhaps this is because in solitary confinement there is no-one to talk to except the occasional prison warder and the interrogator, against

whom one is on constant alert. The relentless efforts of the interrogator, whose persistent attempts at wearing down resistance and dignity cause immeasurable emotional agony, reinforce many detainees' refusal to talk or answer any questions.

As a consequence of this, the newly released detainee has a need to talk extensively and sometimes to write, not only of the experiences inside prison, but about anything at all that will allow him or her to feel that he/she belongs to the real world, peopled with human beings. Writing is not only cathartic; it also helps to re-establish contact with the world outside of the solitary cell.

Talking, writing, or any tangible type of communication becomes vitally important to people in prison. The imagination, memory and fantasy world become all important, as is evidenced in the texts discussed. In solitary confinement, as both Ruth First and Albie Sachs describe,[7] the imagination is extremely valuable, but it is very important not to lose touch with reality, so that one is able to retain control over one's situation.

Albie Sachs succeeded in retaining control by designing a routine of both physical and mental exercises: he jogged in the prison yard and forced himself to adhere to a strict routine. First tended to make use of her physical surroundings and her few possessions to keep herself occupied and tried continually to plan one step ahead of her interrogators.

The experiences of solitary detainees, although each unique, reflect a commonness and a shared experience. For example the memoirs of Ruth First, Albie Sachs and James Kantor[8] "talk" to one another, each substantiating the claims made in the other two books and discussing the experiences of others. Most significantly, the books serve to validate the experiences of all detainees, so often denied and challenged by the Security Police.[9]

Detainees remain a tortured and voiceless community, but through the writings of such people as First and Sachs,[10] they are given strength to continue their struggle for survival with the knowledge that others have survived before them.

Ruth First's account of her 117 days at Marshall Square and Pretoria Central Prison depicts both the public and private worlds of Ruth First Slovo, daughter of founder members of the South African Communist Party (SACP),[11] married to Joe Slovo,[12] SACP and African National Congress (ANC) activist. Slovo had fled the country in June 1963 in the wake of intensified restriction orders (including his own banning) and general tightening up by the government. The Slovos had three young daughters[13] who were left parentless when their mother was detained. They were cared for by their grandmother, Matilda First.

In his preface to 117 Days, Ronald Segal[14] describes Ruth First as a shy, private person who was reluctant to share her personal life with the world. He writes

> Of all her published writings 117 Days is the only one in which Ruth revealed much of herself. She knew that the book would be meaningless unless she did so and was accordingly reluctant to write it. I had only to persuade her of the political value such a book would have, for her to accept the costs - the stirring up so soon of experiences that she would far rather have left slowly to settle and, more painfully still, exposing them, with all that they exposed of herself, to promiscuous view.
> (117 Days, Preface)

First was known to the South African public as a banned member of the SACP; she was a renowned investigative journalist who exposed atrocity and exploitation, notably among farm labourers.[15] She had been editor of the Transvaal office of the Communist Party journal "The Guardian", re-establishing the journal under new names each time it was banned. (It was also known as

"New Age" and "Fighting Talk", a copy of which was found in her house when she was arrested.) The journal was finally silenced in 196

In 1962, First was restricted to the Johannesburg magisterial district for five years, under the Suppression of Communism Act.[16] Among the conditions of her banning order was one which prevented her from entering newspaper or publishing premises, and as she was a listed communist,[17] she could no longer write articles for publication. Banned people were forbidden to communicate with one another except by special permission; the Slovos had to request such permission.

After her restriction orders had been imposed, Ruth First realised that she would have to establish a new professional career for herself. She decided to enrol for a diploma in librarianship at the University of the Witwatersrand. It was there that she was arrested.

In order to contextualise Ruth First's detention and her writing of it, it is necessary to outline the role of the South African Communist Party and African National Congress in the 1950s and 1960s.

The 1950s gave rise to a decade of defiance in South Africa, a time when organised resistance against the Nationalist government[18] was highly effective. The major organisations behind the resistance actions were the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), the African National Congress, the South African Indian Congress (SAIC), and in the early 1960s, the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC).[19]

The CPSA had been banned in 1950 under the Suppression of Communism Act. The party had dissolved itself prior to the passing of the act and worked underground after reforming as the South African Communist Party. In 1952, the SACP and other congress movements (ANC, SAIC) launched the "Defiance of Unjust Laws" campaign, aimed at defying any laws that enforced

discrimination on the grounds of race. Such laws included pass laws, curfews for urban blacks, segregated public facilities and group areas regulations. The campaign advocated non-violence, for violence was viewed as an abhorrent tactic of the Nationalist government. It was instead organised as a campaign of passive resistence, as practised by Mahatma Gandhi earlier this century when he lived in South Africa.[20]

In 1953, the government passed the Criminal Laws Amendment Act[21] and the Public Safety Act;[22] these acts empowered the government to declare a state of emergency whenever it deemed it necessary.[23] The passing of these acts indicates the extent to which the Defiance Campaign had threatened the peace of mind of the country's rulers.

Although the laws were not abolished, several communities throughout South Africa began to see the significance and power of cooperation and unity in fighting apartheid. This had led to the formation in 1952 of the Congress of Democrats (COD). By 1954 the congress movements had expanded into the Congress Alliance, the organization responsible for drawing up the Freedom Charter at Kliptown in June 1955.[24] The government was clearly threatened by the strength of numbers involved in the gathering at Kliptown. From 1955, the state aimed at crushing the Alliance, which it alleged was under the control of the SACP. Government efforts to track down communists and members of the Congress Alliance resulted in a protracted Treason Trial, which was heard from 1956 to 1961 and culminated in the acquittal of all 156 accused.

Ruth First had been one of the accused in this trial. She had been involved in all the events outlined above, although her discharge from the treason trial occurred in 1958. Despite arrest, banning and intimidation by the government, she remained active in the SACP and COD.

Although the ANC was NOT a communist organisation, many of its members belonged to the SACP as well. A number of Africanists in the organisation resented the communist faction, believing that the SACP was trying to take over the ANC and distract it from its major purpose - the abolition of the injustice of apartheid. A number of these people broke away and formed the PAC.[25] Their resistance strategies were different from those of the ANC, but in response to the protests and resistance strategies of both organisations, the government passed the Unlawful Organisations Act,[26] and banned both. Simultaneously, the Public Safety Act of 1953 was invoked and a state of emergency was declared. Thousands of people were detained without trial under emergency regulations.[27]

After the banning of the ANC and PAC, several activists, rank and file as well as leadership, began to reassess their views about passive, non-violent resistance. The state insisted that the leadership were all communists, controlled by the SACP and Moscow, and that it was their communism that had turned them into violent saboteurs.

Some, but not all of the ANC leadership were members of the SACP.[28] Ruth First was, however, a committed member of both the South African Communist Party and the ANC.

After the Sharpeville shootings in 1960[29] and the rapid escalation of repressive state violence, several members of the ANC, including Nelson Mandela and Walter Sisulu, decided that passive resistance and negotiation with the state were no longer possible, and that from then on, violence would be countered with violence.[30] In June 1961, the ANC national executive met to form Umkhonto we Sizwe, the "spear of the nation". They were adamant that this was a separate organisation from both the ANC and the SACP, or any congress movement. The Congress Alliance as a whole would not accept violence as

a solution to South Africa's problems. Umkhonto we Sizwe remained an affiliate of the ANC.[31] It was open to both black and white members, many of whom were members of the SACP as well. It was at this stage that the SACP began to collaborate closely with the ANC.

Umkhonto undertook acts of sabotage throughout the country, attacking government buildings, signal boxes, and electrical power lines. Sabotage was directed at symbols of state repression, and not at civilians. By 1962, the effects of Umkhonto's actions were felt strongly enough for the government to pass a new act in parliament: the Sabotage Act.[32] This act made sabotage a capital offence and provided for the house arrest of several already banned people, suspected of undergoing and running sabotage training. Both Mandela and Sisulu[33] were arrested and tried under this act. In 1961, Mandela was sentenced to three years' imprisonment for incitement and two years for leaving South Africa without a passport. Sisulu had been sentenced to six years for inciting strike action and for being a member of a banned organisation (the ANC). While awaiting the outcome of his appeal, he had gone into hiding at Liliesleaf Farm in Rivonia, north of Johannesburg.

The security police had been tipped off that Liliesleaf was the headquarters of Umkhonto we Sizwe. On 12th July 1963, they arrived at the farm in a laundry van and surprised the residents, many of whom were wearing disguises. A total of eighteen people were arrested at Liliesleaf, some of whom were high profile ANC activists, some who were unknown to the police as activists, others servants at the farmhouse.[34] In 117 Days, First speculated that her detention was connected with the events at Rivonia.

An intensive search of the farmhouse, owned by Arthur and Hazel Goldreich, its outbuildings and the grounds, provided the security police with all the incriminating

evidence they required; fingerprints, documents, broadcasting transmitters,[35] diagrams of explosive devices and human suspects. Harold Wolpe, one of the suspects, was pursued on the basis of a fingerprint.

One week after the arrests at Rivonia, Wolpe was apprehended at the Bechuanaland[36] border. He was held in custody at Marshall Square, and with Arthur Goldreich and two Indian Congress activists,[37] succeeded in escaping from the jail with the assistance of a warder.[38] The escape, which received much publicity, was coordinated by their comrades in Johannesburg, who arranged accommodation and secrecy.

Three weeks after the Rivonia arrests, on the 9th of August 1963, Ruth First found herself alone in a bleak cell in Marshall Square, with nothing to do but sleep and think.

> Aloneness and idleness would be an unutterably prolonged bore, but it was early to worry about that, and for as long as I could, I would draw satisfaction from the time I had, at last, to think! Uninterruptedly, undistracted by the commands of daily living and working.
> (117 Days, page 18)

In the book, First was careful to reveal herself as an ordinary human being, a parent and a daughter, as well as a political activist. It was important to her to expose a side of herself so different from the one the South African media portrayed. In addition, it was important to explain to her readers that it was not merely the political figure or the movement that suffered in solitary confinement, but the human being.

Although the prison experience depicted in 117 Days is uniquely her own, Ruth First locates herself and her experience in the historical context of which she was a part: the South African Communist Party, which, in 1963, was finally about to be destroyed. From then on, it would exist only in exile.

Since the day of the Rivonia arrests, First had anticipated her detention. She was not sure how much

information the security police had uncovered about the SACP during the raid at Rivonia, but suspected that there was not much. Nonetheless, she feared that they might arrest her on the chance that she was implicated. It seems from her book that this was their only reason for detaining h r.

First had been detained briefly once before, at the start of the protracted Treason Trial in 1956. She knew many people who had been in solitary confinement; they had discussed their ordeal with her, and thus she knew what sort of treatment to expect in jail.

In sharing with the reader the way she survived each day, First's book serves a practical, functional purpose for future detainees. She understood the importance of sharing prison experience and provides the reader with ideas for survival. She explains how she went about surviving from day to day.

In her opening passage she presents the world to which she was confined

> A black iron bedstead became my world. (...) The mattress was lumpy; the grey prison blankets matted; the grey prison blankets were heavy as tarpaulins and smelt of mouldy potatoes. (...) Seen from the door, the cell had been catacomb-like, claustrophobic. Concrete-cold. Without the naked electric bulb burning, a single yellow eye, in the centre of the ceiling, the cell would have been totally black; the bulb illuminated the grey dirt on the walls which was painted black two-thirds of the way up. The remaining third of the cell wall had been white once; the dust was a dirty film over the original surface. The window, high in the wall above the head of the bedstead, triple thick - barred, barred again and meshed - with sticky black soot on top of all three protective layers, was a closing, not an opening. Three paces from the door and I was already at the (Ibid, page 9)

The world that First portrays is a world remembered from intensely accurate observation. Solitary confinement, with its total absence of stimuli, forced her to observe

carefully her physical surroundings. She had another more obscure reason for doing this:

> It seemed important to be accurate. Someone might ask me one day - when? - the size of my cell.
> (Ibid, page 10)

In addition to describing the cell, First locates it in the bustling police station at Marshall Square, the layout of which she pieces together from noises and rowdy prisoners. She names the wardresses at the police station according to the tones in their voices: Shrill, Pained, Raucous and Competent. She presents these wardresses as "literary" characters, as if they were part of a novel. She relates what little she knows about their lives because their after-hours circumstances remind her that there is a world outside. She speculates about their homes and their families. She wonders about the other prisoners, who move in and out of the cells on their way to and from court or home. Police cells are not for long term prisoners; they serve as transit points for those newly arrested or awaiting trial. Sentenced prisoners are held in prisons and not police stations. First was held in both.

One of the descriptions she offers about her days in the police station concerns her bath time routine. She tried to ensure that the wardresses did not vary this for her, as routine was comforting.

> Washing in a bucket was the highlight of my day. (...) In time I improvised a bath by acrobatics. I poised the water into the basin and perched on it in an inelegant squat, face and stomach towards the wall, legs dangling. Then I poured water over myself with cupped hands. It made a great splash that sounded like fun if anyone cared to listen, and I knew that the prisoners would hold the pools of water on the floor against, not me, but the wardresses if they were called in to do a second mopping. Bath over, it was the start of a new day, another day of torpid inactivity.
> (Ibid, page 39)

In all the texts discussed in this study, the significance of storytelling, of voice, of communication & of the oral tradition of prison lore is emphasised. Formally, this chapter is no different; the focus here is instead on the lack of all the above. Actual oral communication has been replaced by written and published versions of the experience. This is one of the reasons for the quantity of solitary confinement literature. The literature (or diary or memoir, even letters) replaces the speech and the yarns described in both Lessing's and Bosman's writing.

117 Days as a book about incarceration is different from both Bosman's Cold Stone Jug and Lessing's Forth From The Dungeon in one major respect: those books attempt a reconstruction of the social world of the prison. Ruth First's book cannot do that. Her prison world was totally her own; it did not have others in it. She cannot reconstruct a social world because at no time was she a participant in any aspect of prison social life. She was detained absolutely alone for one hundred and seventeen days.

First could not resort to Bosman's technique of storytelling in her memoir, because she was not in contact with any storytellers. (Albie Sachs' Jail Diary is different from First's book in this regard; he used the tales of, for example, the station commander at Wynberg Police Station to communicate the world of his imprisonment.[39]) First tells her own tale, and links it to the experiences of others. She does this by reporting, in italics, tales she heard on her release.

James Kantor tried to do the same in his book, A Healer Grows. Their accounts of the arrests at Rivonia, of the escape from Marshall Square and of the other detainees are factually almost identical, but are presented very differently. While Ruth First remained the "objective" journalist James Kantor presented

anecdotes.[40] First's "journalistic" inserts include reports of Wolpe and Goldreich's escape, Dennis Brutus' escape,[41] references to other 90 day detainees, deaths in detention, and the loss of sanity suffered by several detainees. She uses these inserts as complements to her own experience, not only to validate her own, but to expose the conditions of others.

Since First was not able to construct a world similar to those of regular prisoners, such as Bosman and Lessing, she constructs one from the emptiness and starkness of her isolation. Although inside a prison, she was in effect an outsider who knew little of prison routine and never met regular prisoners.

There is no oral tradition within the prison for solitary detainees to hear; the best they can get for example, are the scribbles of previous inmates on cell walls.

> "I am here for murdering my baby. I'm 14 years ..." The warderesses told me they remembered that girl. They were vague about authors of other wall scribbles. 'Magda loves Vincent for Ever ...' appeared several times in devotedly persistent proclamation. Others conveyed the same sentiment but with lewd words and too graphic illustrations, and in between the obscenities on the wall crawled the hearts and Cupid's arrows. The women prisoners of the Sharpeville Emergency[42] had left their mark in the "... Meyiboye i'Afrika ..." [Let Africa Come back] slogan still faintly visible.
> (Ibid, page 10)

As demonstrated in the previous chapters, convicted prisoners share their various prison experiences with one another. They relate tales of what has happened in the past, what is happening currently. They gossip about fellow convicts and about the warders. Despite strict rules, convicted prisoners are in continual contact with one another and there are no bars on their communicating.

For solitary detainees, who are deprived of all contact with other prison inmates, there is immense

comfort in knowing that the experience of incarceration is shared. This applies particularly to solitary detainees whose solace lies in the knowledge that not only have others shared their experiences, but that they have survived. The publication of a prison experience in solitary confinement serves to reassure future detainees that most do survive the ordeal, despite the statistics of deaths in detention.[43] The knowledge that another person experienced the same or similar ordeal is indeed comforting. Knowledge that other people are in detention at the same time however, can be distracting and confusing as well as reassuring.

For example, when First discovered that Hazel Goldreich, at whose home the Rivonia arrests were made, was also incarcerated at Marshall Square,[44] she was delighted.

> The encounter had taken place and though the precautions against our seeing one another were stricter than ever, we knew we had company beyond the courtyard wall, and the presence of someone else in the same predicament was self-duly reassuring.
> (Ibid, page 26)

Another incident that First relates was the discovery that James Kantor had been detained. At first, this confused and puzzled her, rather than consoled her, as she knew that he was not a political activist. (She discovered Kantor's detention through one of the scribbles on the courtyard wall.) Kantor was linked to the political movements to which First belonged only through his relationship to Harold Wolpe, his brother-in-law and legal partner. Although at first stunned by the discovery of his detention, First soon turned this knowledge to her advantage; she realised that if Kantor had been detained, Wolpe's escape from Marshall Square, which she already knew about,[45] had been totally successful.

It would seem from Ruth First's text that she was involved in planning the hideout of the escapers and knew

that the escape was scheduled for 10th August. Her arrest on 9th August somehow absolved her from suspicion.

First describes how she was just beginning to get herself used to her new surroundings when she was disrupted by a commotion in the prison. On the Saturday evening, she heard a bottle crash onto the floor. On Sunday there was pandemonium.

> The wardresses were tight-lipped, on edge. A fever seemed to rage in the working part of the police station, and the raised temperature flowed out to the prisoners lying in their cells. There were four instead of two inspections that night.
> (Ibid, page 19)

Soon after, First realised that she had a companion in the cells[46] - Anne-Marie Wolpe, Harold's wife. She writes

> If Anne-Marie had been taken, Harold must have got safely away. The escape had come off, I decided. Thirty-six hours before I had gone into Marshall Square a breakout of the cells was being planned ...
> (Ibid, page 20)

First was at no time questioned about the escape, but in her memoir she writes about it as if she were reporting it in her newspaper. Her tone is detached and as objective as possible. She reveals that the bottle she heard breaking was kicked over by Arthur Goldreich during the flight.

First's insert about the escape is printed in italics, her way of presenting events related to her detention but of which she was not a part. The story she presents about the escape was clearly heard after her release.[47] The sections of the book that appear in italics are the pieces in which her journalistic skill is evident.[48]

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One of the more important reasons for publishing one's prison experience is to inform the general public about the conditions under which detainees are held and

indirectly to assist future detainees in devising survival techniques. The written word replaces the verbal communication that takes place in a conventional prison situation.

This function of Ruth First's book (and those of most other writers describing imprisonment in South Africa) is however, partially lost. The South African authorities[49] banned the book so that South African readers could not have access to it.[50] This is one of the ways of denying detainees a voice and a contact with their world.

In 117 Days First reveals that she was semi-prepared for her detention. The previous year, 1962, she had been banned. Her husband had fled the country and many of her comrades from the SACP had been detained or arrested at Rivonia. She was worried throughout her 117 days that the state would charge her in the Rivonia Trial.[51] She feared that she would be heavily implicated by informers or suspected by the logic of the Security Police who knew her background. She did not think that the state could press any serious charges against her, but she worried nonetheless.[52] *As far as she knew*, the only charge they could press was one for possession of a banned journal - the copy of "Fighting Talk" that had been found in her house on the day of her arrest.

While thinking about why *she* was arrested, First tells that she packed a suitcase with particular items aimed at making the detention somehow bearable.

> My confiscated red suitcase, carefully packed from the accumulated experience of so many of us who had been arrested before ...
> (Ibid, page 17)

She knew exactly what she would need and what was allowed. But as Ellen Kuzwayo relates,[53] as much as one is prepared and waiting for the arrest, one cannot be prepared for the shock when it actually happens. Kuzwayo says

> Even if I had read heaps and heaps of literature on it, a moment like that [the arrest] shuts everything out.
> (Interview)

Nevertheless, once in the cell, the thoughts of other people's experiences do return and can assist the detainee in adjusting to solitary confinement.

First recalls how she had had several ideas about what she might need in her cell. She therefore smuggled in a needle, hidden carefully in her red suitcase, knowing that she might need it to stitch a calendar onto her clothing, or to scratch on walls.

From the first day at Marshall Square, Ruth First designed a few activities for herself, to occupy the time she was not asleep. All solitary detainees write about the way they try to fill their time. Most rigid of all, as related earlier, was Albie Sachs.

First was more fortunate than most detainees in that she had a bed. At that stage, many prisoners did not have beds but slept on mats on the floor. Her bed was the most important place in the cell; it was the only place in the cell that she could live her private, secret life. She could think, sleep and dream.

She describes how and why thinking was the most important of all her activities. It helped her to prepare for interrogations and allowed her space in which to assess her commitment to the SACP. She also thought about her children and her husband, her parents and her brother. But most of all she thought about possible interrogations.

She made it her primary aim to be able to pre-empt questions and plan ways to avoid answering them. She

> was becoming master of the ambiguous and evasive reply to the questions I invented for my unseen interrogators.
> (op cit, page 19)

Yet she realised early on in her detention that she could not allow herself to think all the time.

> I pushed out of my head a jumble of ideas and thoughts of people, with a deliberate resolve to think slowly, about one thing at a time, and to store up as much as I could for future days and nights. I postponed thinking about how I would try to pass the time. That, too, would be a subject for future hours. This was a time of strict emergency, and called for strict rationing.
> (Ibid, page 19)

After only a very brief spell on her own, First reveals that she was

> forced to do what storybook prisoners do: pace the length and breadth of the cell.
> (Ibid, page 10)

The reference to storybook prisoners indicates that First was aware of a literary tradition of prison writing. She knew from reading books about prisoners that that was the way prisoners spent their time. She cites the example partly because she is now part of this literary tradition.

She complains that she was deprived of all forms of stimuli - no books or newspapers, no pen or paper, no music, and no company. Worst of all, she was not allowed any visits, except occasionally by special permission. She saw her mother three times, and her children twice. She also saw her sister-in-law once.

As time dragged on, First discovered and invented many methods of passing the time, apart from thinking and pacing. She read the grafitti on the cell walls, and mused over it. She scratched her own inscriptions alongside these.

One of First's most exciting and interesting activities was peering through the bars of the window, trying to decipher newspaper headlines on posters taped to a pole outside. (Marshall Square was in Johannesburg's

Central Business District, on the corner of Marshall and Sauer Streets.) In this way, she tried to keep track of any important events taking place (mostly unsuccessfully) and passed many hours trying to make sense of partly obscured headlines. She writes

> I was watching the after-dinner rush back to the offices one day when I made an exciting discovery. A bustle on the pavement diametrically opposite my grille disclosed an African newspaper vendor setting up shop on the paving stones. (...) He got the poster up and then withdrew to the business of selling out his edition. (...) Perhaps if he had known I was craning my neck from the cell window over the road he might not have hung the poster so that two-thirds of the letters faced directly away from my gaze. To me it looked like this:
>
> QUA
> I
> RSD
>
> (Ibid, page 41)

Try as she might, she could not work out that "QUA" was "Quake". She did not think that Rhodesia[54] was prone to earthquakes.

From the beginning of her first 90 days at Marshall Square,[55] Ruth First was aware of the somewhat singular status accorded her: she was allowed access to her suitcase, and received food parcels and clean clothing from home.

> Throughout my stay in Marshall Square my suitcase was the difference between me and the casual prisoners.[56] I lived in the cells; they were in transit. I had equipment, reserves. Their lipsticks were taken from them, and their combs, to be restored only when they were fetched to appear before a magistrate in court. The casuals were booked in from the police van in the clothes they had worn when they were arrested, and if they wanted a clean blouse they had to plead with the wardress to get the cell warder to telephone a relative. I could go to my suitcase. I had supplies. I was a long termer in the cells.
> (Ibid, page 18)

First had access not only to her suitcase, comb and lipstick, but also to the glass cosmetic bottles she had packed: glass was a forbidden object because of its danger should prisoners become violent.

Despite her acknowledged difference of status, First classifies herself with the others because that is how she was seen by prison staff in their carrying out of basic daily regulations. Although she was there under harsher terms, she was nonetheless subject to the whims of the authorities.

The other major difference between First and the regular prisoners was, of course, that she was in solitary confinement, denied bail and access to legal counsel. For most of the 117 days, she was the only woman detainee in the country. The others, who were released fairly soon after their detention, were Hazel Goldreich and Anne-Marie Wolpe.[57]

As she was in solitary confinement, First was denied all contact with other white prisoners: she recounts that if she was being taken to have her bath, all others were locked away.

This 24 hour a day solitude is still enforced,[58] Maxine Nkwe, detained for four and a half months in 1984 - 85, describes her solitude in John Vorster Square and Diepkloof prison:

> If I was going anywhere and other prisoners were in the passage, they were ordered to face the wall until I'd passed. I don't know what the sight of me would have done to them; I was the one who needed human contact.
> (Ibid, page 67)

Ellen Kuzwayo, detained in 1977 at the Fort in Johannesburg, describes how adolescent girls detained in solitary confinement were not allowed to be seen by the adult detainees; the adults, not all of whom were in solitary confinement, made every effort to communicate verbally with them:

> would wait until they were going to see the
> or something. We'd stand in the passages
> our cells and defy all the traditions of
> the prison, which expected us to look away, turn
> our heads when they passed. We did not let it
> happen. We greeted them, and they responded.
> It was the only human contact they had. Those
> in charge got furious.
> (Interview)

First relates how one day, due to the negligence of a wardress, she and Hazel Goldreich were left alone together in the prison yard. As soon as this was discovered, they were sent back to their cells, but, as quoted earlier, they had seen each other, and felt comfort in the knowledge of the other's presence.

After some time at Marshall Square, First was transferred to Pretoria Central;59 she writes that there, she would hang from her bars and stare out at the prison world below her. Once in a new atmosphere, she found she had to redesign her time-passing activities. In Marshall Square she used to pass time by, for example, sleeping, or staring through the bars. At Pretoria Central, she notes that she could not scratch the wall with her hairpin, so she moved her calendar to the lapel of her dressing gown, where

> With my needle and thread, I stitched one stroke
> for each day passed. I sewed seven upright
> strokes, then a horizontal stitch through them
> to mark a week. Every now and then I would
> examine the stitching and decide that it was not
> neat enough and the strokes could be more deadly
> exact in size; I'd pull the thread out and
> remake the calendar from the beginning. This
> gave me a feeling that I was pushing time on,
> creating days, weeks and even months. Sometimes
> I surprised myself and did not sew a stitch at
> the end of the day. I would wait three days and
> then give myself a wonderful thrill knocking
> three days off the ninety.
> (op cit, page 74)

She says as well that

> The routine activities I could organise for
> myself were few, and however I struggled to
> stretch them out, they were over disappointingly
> soon and I had to sink back again into inertia.
> (Ibid, page 73)

Her routine activities including making, stripping and remaking the bed several times a day, folding and re-folding her clothes, packing and repacking her red suitcase; she

> dusted and polished everything in sight, cleaned the walls with a tissue. I filed my nails painstakingly. I plucked my eyebrows, then the hair from my legs, one hair at a time with a very small set of tweezers.
> (Ibid, page 73)

She also *unpicked seams* on her clothing and restitched them, becoming obsessive about her routines. She would listen to the sounds of cars driving past the prison and try to identify them; she would play games with orange pips, which she threw into a paper bag from a distance. None of these activities took up much of the time; she was always aware that she was doing them merely to push time forward.

With so many empty, meaningless days and mundane activities, it is not surprising that First remembered so vividly everything that happened to her in the 117 days. Every conversation she had during her detention was *imprinted on* her memory, for there were so few. Interrogations were fairly frequent, but she says that they were almost always the same. She was determined to reveal nothing about herself, her husband or her political activity, but she was trying to gain as much as she could for her own armoury by listening carefully to the questions asked by the Security Police. She recalls that she tried to gauge how much they knew about her and her activities from the way they formulated their questions.60

Detention without trial is not a uniquely South African form of imprisonment, but in South Africa such detention has been carefully legislated since 196361 and has received much attention from a variety of international organisations.62 The death in detention of 65

people since the introduction of the "no trial law", is due not only to Security Police brutality but also to the effects of solitary confinement and extreme deprivation. Solitary confinement was the fate of anyone detained under the "no trial law".

Mental stimulation of any kind was absolutely forbidden; ninety day detainees were allowed no books or writing materials. Although First had packed a book into her suitcase, it was confiscated. When she protested to her jailers that she had nothing to read, she was told:

> If you have something to read you will not think about my questions, Mrs Slovo.
> (Ibid, page 83)

This rule was challenged in court - on behalf of Albie Sachs, who was at that time detained in Cape Town - and reversed.[63] Towards the end of First's period of detention, she was suddenly allowed a "reasonable supply" of reading and writing material, as were all 90 day detainees. Shortly after this change, the original rule was re-enforced and detainees were once again deprived of reading matter and writing material.

While First was being driven from Johannesburg to Pretoria, one of the Security Police officers tried to engage her in conversation:

> He wouldn't like to be locked up under Ninety Days, van Rensburg said. He didn't mind telling me that what he would miss most would be books.
> "Really," I said. "What books do you read?"
> "Philosophy," he said.
> (Ibid, page 60)

Van Rensburg was obviously emphasising the fact that she was not allowed to read, in the hope that she would break down and "confess". Instead, she ignored him and continued filling her time with inanities.

One of the aims of detention in solitary confinement is to coerce the detainee into making a statement, by

depriving her/him of any stimuli in the hope that she/he will be moved to make a "confessional" statement to the Security Police.

The Security Police are relentless in their pursuit of confessions; they resort to physical torture, involving beatings, kicking, hanging detainees by their limbs, as well as electric shocks, in the hope of eliciting not only a confession, but implications of all their suspects.[64] When a political detainee (or any prisoner) dies in police custody, the state requires an inquest to determine whether the detainee killed himself/herself or was killed by the police. Ruth First illustrates, in 117 Days, how the inquest courts blatantly ignore evidence and testimony under oath. First cites the example of Looksmart Solwandle Ngudle,[65] who died after brutal assaults including electric shocks and constriction in manacles.

> The inquest court ruled that Ngudle had committed suicide by hanging himself. Perhaps Looksmart Ngudle hanged himself - but he did so, according to First, as a direct result of the brutality to which he had been subjected; the inquest court absolved the police of all culpability. Many of the suicides which occur in prison can be linked to police brutality both in its physical and psychological manifestations. (Ruth First describes her own suicide attempt as a result of the psychological torment imposed on her by her interrogators.)

Using her journalistic expertise, First reports on Ngudle's death and the subsequent inquest:

> The Ninety-Day law was promulgated in May. On 13 May th Looksmart was detained. On 5 September, sixteen days later, he was found dead in his cell. A short news item to this effect appeared in the daily press. (...) The magistrate returned a verdict that Looksmart Solwandle Ngudle had committed suicide by hanging himself, and his death was not due to "any act or omission involving or amounting to an offence of the part of any person."
> (Ibid, page 102)

In order to avoid similar torture, First tried initially to be polite to her interrogators while refusing to answer their questions. Eventually, when her resistance was worn down, she agreed to make a statement telling them about herself. She was evasive but truthful, and they were not satisfied.

Throughout the 117 days, the Security Police tried to elicit a statement from First. As with other detainees, they threatened her with a prison sentence on the basis that they knew what she had been involved in and that others had made statements which implicated her. First knew that she had done nothing to warrant a long sentence: she had visited Rivonia only once, and had not broken her banning order. She did not expect to be charged, despite the continued insistence of the interrogators that she would be. The public believed she would be charged because a newspaper report in the Rand Daily Mail of 31st October 1963 speculated that she would appear in court with the Rivonia accused.

The report states: "Ruth Slovo is to be charged" - "Ruth Slovo (...) is expected to be charged - probably at the end of her 90-day period next week."

When she was arrested, First assumed that it was in connection with the arrests at Rivonia. She knew that she had to think carefully about the events at Rivonia to ensure that she did not reveal any information to her interrogators. She struggled to invent an interrogation so that she could rehearse her non-committal answers. The actual interrogations were far worse than she had imagined, but the rehearsed answers worked nonetheless.

Ironically, First was able to rehearse her answers and prepare herself for interrogation because for the first time in many months, she had some time to herself. Had she been in a communal cell, First might not have managed to manipulate the situation in her favour. The

idea of using the time and solitude to think for her own benefit is an inversion of the intention of solitary confinement, as outlined above.

Writing about detention serves as a bridge between solitary confinement and resumption of daily life; it also provides a means for dealing with the emotional pain of the detention.

For example, First reveals through her writing how she felt about being separated from her children. She writes

> I tried to put firmly out of my mind the faces of the children as I was driven away. Shawn had fled into the garden so that I would not see her cry.
> (Ibid, page 12)

Later, she writes

> I had to stop thinking about the children. I needed all my concentration to handle my own situation ... but of course I couldn't stop thinking about them.
> (Ibid, page 57)

She claims that she tried her hardest to think only of her own predicament, in order to survive it.

She mulled over the Rivonia arrests and the possible implications for her own future; she thought about the copy of "Fighting Talk" that had been found in her house and wondered if she would be charged with possessing a banned publication; and often, she thought about her fellow detainees, especially those arrested in the raid on Rivonia. She knew enough about what had been planned there to realise that almost all of them would receive lengthy sentences. She was deeply concerned about them.

It is interesting to observe how First alters her writing style when she writes about people who mean a lot to her. When writing of her colleagues, friends and SACP comrades, she uses a detatched journalistic style; when writing of herself and her loved ones she is more emotional. The extracts about her children reveal her

depth of feeling and anguish about them. She does not write much about her husband, Joe Slovo, but reveals her dependence on him:

> Hardest of all, I would struggle not to think about the children. They would be elsewhere, where they could grow up without the continuous reminder of me in a prison, and they would have Joe. I had always needed him so; he would give the children his confidence, his optimism, his humour. It could have been so much worse. Joe might have been sitting in a cell upstairs ...
> (Ibid, page 57)

Later, she describes a visit from her mother and her children:

> It did them good to see that I looked the same and talked not of being locked up but of school and the cat, library books and holidays. Shawn, a vulnerable thirteen year old, seemed closest to tears; serious and wide-eyed considerate Gillian exerted her usual tight control; and jolly Robyn was diverted throughout the short visit by a conspiracy of her own. They handed me a fistful of bubblegum on arrival, and when the time came to say goo bye, Robyn whispered in between her hugs: "It's Ch-ys-'s Bubblegum. There are things written on the inside of the paper, something for you to read!" I chewed the gum and read the wrappings.
> (Ibid, page 50)

The other style she employs is more appropriate for the journalist than the autobiographer. It lends credibility and objectivity to her reportage. It also allows her the distance to deal with a situation that might have affected her life far more drastically - she might have been found at Lillieslaef Farm and imprisoned for life.

First writes as a journalist when describing the escape from Marshall Square, the escape and shooting of Dennis Brutus, the smuggled letters of one of the Rivonia detainees, torture and deaths in detention, and the false releases of 90 day detainees.

Her tone in these pieces, most of them fairly lengthy, is impersonal and slightly distant. She tries to

present factual evidence of the experiences of other detainees - using footnotes and referring to people less as friends than as subjects of a report. The journalistic inserts serve to balance Ruth First's prison account so that it is not simply an autobiography of one person's experience - it gives a picture of a range of similar experiences.

As in the works of other solitary detainees,[66] the concept of time became the most important focus of First's life. By thinking about time she occasionally avoided thinking painful thoughts about her children and other loved ones, and about the possibility of her facing charges. The aim of thinking about time rather than simply waiting for it to pass was to force it to move more rapidly, with the result that it passed more slowly:

> Like sand dribbling through an hourglass, the passage of time became a physical act dribbling through my consciousness.
> (Ibid, page 74)

Bosman wrote extensively about time in prison, illustrating the futility of it all with the story of the convict Botha sorting out the printers' type.[67] Bosman's time, and that of other convicted prisoners, was filled with routine events, labour, illness, hunger strikes and the prospect of release. Ruth First's time was totally futile; she felt that she required an enormous amount of initiative and personal strength to combat the futility.

> I was appalled at the absence of my inventive and imaginative powers. But I determined to survive by adjusting to a state of enforced hibernation.
> (Ibid, page 73)

First's response is similar to Albie Sachs', who writes

> I always think more clearly after having done something, especially after having moved around physically. It is hard to follow through a line of thought. What was I thinking about just now? I cannot remember. Hell, I can't even think properly.
> (Jail Diary, page 54)

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